

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: A BASIS FOR AN APPROACH TO
PREPARATION FOR MEMBERSHIP IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Ministry

by
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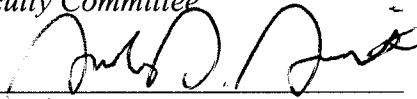
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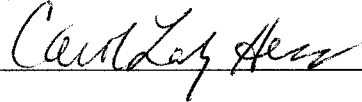
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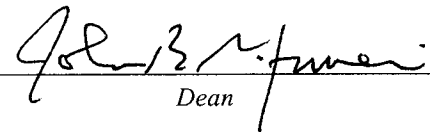
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Abstract

Spiritual Practices: A Basis for an Approach to Preparation for Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Kendrick Erling Curtis

In spite of the fact that personal spirituality is central to the life of faith for Seventh-day Adventists, the preparation for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally given relatively little attention to cultivating spiritual practices as the containers which hold spiritual lives, shape identities, and provide the lenses through which doctrine is viewed and understood. Instead, it has tended to rely upon approaches which focus primarily on conveying information, especially that which is distinctive to Adventism, leaving spiritual formation to somehow occur as a by-product. This project proposes a practice-based approach to the process of preparing people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This approach is primarily designed around spiritual practices, but it also provides for the full engagement of the church's fundamental doctrinal beliefs.

Drawing from the works of Clifford Gertz, Alasdair MacIntyre, Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, Miroslav Volf, and their colleagues, a model of spiritual practices is developed and explained. This model is then placed in conversation with approaches currently in use by Seventh-day Adventists. As a part of this dialogue, pastors in the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists are surveyed to surface areas of concurrence with, or resistance to, the idea of a practice-centered approach. Next, possibilities are explored for developing an approach that would suggest a list of practices central to Seventh-day Adventist experience, which, when engaged, would also provide a context for reflecting upon the fundamental points of church doctrine. Finally, a description of what this approach might look like in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is suggested, based on the practices of engaging scripture, awareness, Sabbath observance, wholeness, anticipation, worship, discernment, hospitality, service, and community.

Acknowledgments

It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I express my appreciation for those who have been so integral to my academic experience for the past several years, of which this project is one part. Two individuals in particular have been very significant, not only in advising me in the shaping of this project, but also in shaping my own thinking and spiritual sensitivities.

Andrew Dreitcer, as professor, mentor, and encourager, has provided wonderful opportunities to probe multiple dimensions of Christian spirituality, prayer, spiritual direction, and the practices, in ways that have been both academically and personally enriching. The genuineness, warmth, and integrity reflective of his own spiritual experience greatly reinforced the content of what he taught. His guidance and assistance in crafting this project has been both insightful and helpful, and with the completion of this project, will be missed.

It was Carol Lakey-Hess who first introduced me to the concept of Christian Practices through the work of Craig Dykstra, and who has been an invaluable source of insight and encouragement in pursuing my interests there. Her passion for sensitivity to the significance of naming our location, being careful not to mute the voices of those who have not always been heard as they should, and the implications for how spirituality and the way we engage the process of learning go together, have been firmly implanted in my thinking, for which I am also very appreciative.

Words of appreciation are also extended to Suzi Hebert who spent many hours reading through several drafts and offering helpful suggestions. Also to Elaine Walker for her special expertise and attention to detail. And perhaps most of all to my wife Lael, and my children Brianne and Jordan, who have graciously tolerated the time invested in this project, and who celebrate its completion for a variety of reasons.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY THE PROJECT

Despite the genuine commitment to spiritual formation and the centrality of personal spirituality to the life of faith, the preparation of people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has traditionally given relatively little attention to the cultivating of meaningful spiritual practices as the containers which hold spiritual lives, shape identities, and provide the lenses through which doctrine is viewed and understood. Instead, this preparation has tended to rely upon approaches which focus primarily on conveying accurate and meaningful information, especially that which is distinctive to Adventism, leaving spiritual formation to somehow occur as a by-product.

Importance of the Problem

Over the course of twenty-five years of ministry (primarily among youth), I have worked to prepare scores of people for baptism and/or membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I have used many different sets of materials, including some I have written, and yet I have never been entirely satisfied with their efficacy. Because Adventists have tended to define themselves largely in terms of the content of what they believe, even those materials that give significant attention to developing a meaningful and growing relationship with God, which is very much a part of Adventist life, tend to approach that relationship as though it were a by-product of understanding correctly

articulated doctrine, or one of the content areas to be included along with others, rather than as arising out of practices that are to be modeled, experienced together, and which form the context from which the doctrinal content is engaged and understood. When spiritual practices are neglected, the faith is communicated primarily as information to be articulated and accepted. For example, people who are deeply committed to and can make articulate Biblical arguments for the importance of the Sabbath, may still live very driven lifestyles that deny the rhythms that Sabbath was designed to instill and preserve. Others can passionately communicate their understanding of the ministry of Jesus, and yet fail to live lives that reflect the graciousness that characterized his attitudes toward others. It has become increasingly clear that simply getting the content correct is not enough. Attempts to remedy the situation have sometimes resulted in a tendency to reject the importance of content and simply focus on experience. At other times, some have added “genuine spiritual experience” to the list of content areas that need to be mastered, assuming that when we understand spirituality better a changed life would follow.

Genuine spirituality, however, involves the whole person and therefore includes more than the mastery of a body of information. It is rather a way of life lived in response to the awareness of God’s gracious presence in our lives. It is important, therefore, that people being incorporated into the life of the church are mentored, not just in terms of their acceptance of a set of doctrinal positions, but into a way of living, out of which much of the cognitive content of our faith arises and takes its shape. Particularly in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which places a great deal of emphasis upon, and to a large extent draws its sense of identity from, the content of what is

believed, a practice-based approach to preparing people for membership in the church would provide both a corrective to an over-emphasis on doctrine, and a more explicit way of supporting and nurturing spiritual life.

Even more than providing a more spiritually nurturing approach to preparing people for membership in the church community, a practice-based model involves a significant paradigm shift in how Adventists in particular, and the church in general, articulates what it means to be Christian. While acknowledging that there is a core content of Christian faith – that it is not just *the fact that we believe*, or the *way we believe*, but also *what we believe* that matters – it is a particular way of life reflected in the *practices* of our faith that is the best expression of our identity. In addition, these practices provide the containers that shape and hold our doctrinal convictions. Nurturing spiritual life involves more than acquiring correct information. It also embodies a way of living and the transformation of the whole person.

Furthermore, we live in a society that embraces multiple cultures, faiths, and world views. This means there are not only differences in the content of what is believed, but also in the way we think about what we believe and/or arrive at what we hold to be true. Because Adventist thought and practice developed in the context of 19th century America with a strong emphasis on a correct understanding of doctrine, Adventist identity has been powerfully influenced by the cultural container from which it emerged. As changes in culture and world views have taken place with the passage of time, and as the church has expanded geographically into places reflecting other cultures and world views, Adventists have faced the challenge of sharing their message in a manner that is

meaningful in the new settings they encounter. While in many cases Adventists have often instinctively recognized that practice leads to insight rather than merely arises from it (as, for example, in their emphasis on healthful living), more formal and intentional approaches to bringing others to faith have tended to rely heavily on transmitting a body of doctrinal statements just as they were formulated and articulated in the cultural setting in which they first arose. Without diminishing the significance of the content of what is believed, shifting the focus from previously articulated doctrinal statements of belief to the shared practices out of which fresh formulations and articulations of those beliefs may arise, provides a way for faith to be shared that is meaningful in the present context. As a world-wide church, a practice-based approach would provide a way for Seventh-day Adventists to enter into the life of faith in a manner that would reduce the risk of our cultural differences, our world views, and the way we process information from becoming obstacles. This does not solve all the problems or resolve all the tensions that might occur, but it does provide a way in which believers can come together and engage in common practices, and then allow those practices, and the God who is encountered in the midst of them, to become the basis for their shared identity and bring about changed lives. A practice-based approach would not make the content of what we believe, or how we think about what we believe, unimportant, but it would provide a more relational context in which to engage that content together, and perhaps even be enriched by a variety of insights, rather than allow the differences in perspective to unnecessarily divide us. If the church community is to survive with any real sense of unity in a diverse world, it will need to find common ground in the way of life it represents rather than in uniformity in

all the details of how it arrives at or articulates its doctrine.

Thesis

The purpose of this project is to develop a basis for a practice-based approach to the process of preparing people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church that is primarily designed around spiritual practices that are focused on cultivating personal spirituality and also provides for full engagement of the church's fundamental doctrinal beliefs.

Definitions of Major Terms

Central to the thesis of this project is the concept of *spiritual practices*. This term will be used in a broad sense describing patterns of life which generally include, but are not limited to, spiritual disciplines.¹ For our purposes here, *spiritual practices* will refer to patterns of living in which we intentionally participate, from which we draw meaning, and which together contribute toward a way of life that is lived in responsiveness to an awareness of God's presence.²

¹Two sources that discuss spiritual disciplines at some length are Richard Foster, Celebration of Discipline, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); and Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

²This broad definition is basically the same as that provided by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra in Dorothy C. Bass et al., eds., Practicing Our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), xi; and Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," in Changing Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change, ed. Michael Warren (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press of Oregon Catholic Press, 2000), accessed 30 March 2005; available from <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/downloads/essays/Bass%20&%20Dykstra%20essay.pdf>

Work Previously Done in the Field

This project seeks to integrate broad insights from the study of spirituality, theology, Christian education, and to a lesser extent, anthropology. It is far beyond the scope of this work to fully trace or articulate all which has been done that has influenced and helped to shape the thoughts with which I engage this project. However, while I will inevitably be relying to some degree on contributions that have been broadly made in all these areas, there is specific work that has been done in the area of spiritual practices which, for my purposes here, lays an important foundation.

Spiritual practices in some form have always been with us. As Clifford Geertz notes, speaking in terms of cultural patterns and symbols that constitute a way of life, they function as external sources of information that are vital for human life as we experience it, supplying us with “moods,” “motivations,” and a sense of meaning as they articulate and reinforce a world view that helps us make sense out of our existence.³ Keeping this in mind, the particular way of thinking about them that forms the basis of our discussion here has been coming more into focus since the mid 1990s largely through the work of Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass. A significant part of the basis for their work, however, builds upon a philosophical foundation laid by Alasdair MacIntyre a decade before. Nevertheless, from the mid 1990s onward, a number of others have joined the conversation helping to further expand, sharpen and critique the significance of the spiritual practices. Among the other conversation partners that will be noticed here are

³Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 92, 96-98.

Miroslav Volf, Kathryn Tanner, Margaret Miles and Amy Plantinga Pauw.

In his book, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Alasdair MacIntyre lays the foundation for an understanding of practices as a kind of complex, meaningful activity that is carried on in the context of a community, and sustained by institutions arising out of the community.⁴ It is a kind of activity that has standards of excellence, and when done well, enhances the experience of the practice itself, that of the participants, and is its own reward.⁵

It is upon MacIntyre's foundation that Craig Dykstra builds his understanding of the significance of the practices in Christian spiritual life. Incorporating and expanding all the elements of MacIntyre's construction and with his contention that the practices carry moral weight, Dykstra goes a step further by suggesting that they carry epistemological and (along with co-author Dorothy Bass) theological weight as well.⁶ This provides us with an awareness of things that would not be accessible to us otherwise, ultimately the presence of God.

Additionally, Dykstra goes beyond MacIntyre in pointing out that one of the ways

⁴For a discussion of this aspect of MacIntyre's definition of a practice see Jeffrey Stout, Ethics after Babel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 271-74.

⁵MacIntyre defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 188.

⁶Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," in Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 45; and Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in Practicing Theology, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 21.

the term *Christian* modifies our understanding of the dynamics of a practice has to do with the set of assumptions and the defining story that Christian faith is built upon.⁷

While standards of excellence in most human practices have to do with achievement and mastery, Christian faith has to do with acknowledging the graciousness of God's gift to us, and living in response to God. Thus, while we can learn to live the Christian life well, the goal is less that of excellence and more that of faithfulness.⁸ Indeed, while the practices are taught and are things that can be learned well, our task is not so much to master them, as to allow the practices to, in a sense, master us.⁹

What Dykstra seeks to make clear is that Christian practices are not just functional techniques or activities, but the very things that define who we are and the contexts in which we respond to the God who is revealed there. "Our identities as persons are constituted by practices and the knowledge and relationships they mediate . . . Correlatively, communal life is constituted by practices. Communities do not just engage in practices; in a sense, they are practices."¹⁰

Dykstra also argues that in order for Christian practices to take the central place

⁷In one sense this illustrates what Stout identifies as what many see as a weakness in MacIntyre's formulations: that of determining which systems of social practices with their own internal goods take precedence over others, especially when the internal goods of the various systems are not entirely the same, or are in conflict with each other. Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 284. Dykstra proposes a set of practices that are shaped by a distinctly Christian perspective. Even these, however, arise within and are shaped by the cultures that birth and practice them, raising the question: to what extent should practices be modified (or not) as cultures and contexts change so that both the way of living they seek to pass on and their relevance is preserved?

⁸Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 75-76.

⁹Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 56, 66.

¹⁰Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 47.

that they should, they need to be identified, studied, and entered into.¹¹ He actually suggests lists, some of which he has helped to develop, that arise from his own context in the Presbyterian Church (USA), but focuses most of his attention on their significance and centrality rather than the specific content of any given list.¹²

Dykstra's model finds expression in slightly different language in the materials he and Dorothy C. Bass have produced together.¹³ What emerges out of their combined efforts is a concise and accessible definition of *Christian Practices* as the "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world."¹⁴ For all practical purposes, when it comes to their view of the practices, Bass and Dykstra are fundamentally in agreement.

Working from their definition, Dykstra and Bass describe several key elements of the practices, arguing that because they address fundamental human needs, they are not optional or peripheral but rather touch us at the core of our beings. In fact, by participating in them, we join God in His loving and gracious work by addressing those

¹¹Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 48.

¹²Two examples are found in Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 42, and Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 48.

¹³Writings which are representative of their collaboration include Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," in *Practicing our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 1-12; Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," in *Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change*, ed. Michael Warren (Portland: Pastoral Press of Oregon Catholic Press, 2002), accessed 30 March 2005, available from <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/downloads/essays/Bass%20&%20Dykstra%20essay.pdf>; and Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices."

¹⁴Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 2.

needs through human activity.¹⁵ These ancient practices are done together with those in our local communities, with others who engage in them around the world, and with those who have been engaging in them throughout history, and yet “each practice is also ever new, taking fresh form each day as it subtly adapts to find expression in every neighborhood and land.”¹⁶ Further, often taking place in the context of worship, this participation leads us into a kind of awareness that would be inaccessible to us if we did not take part in them. But as we do, we develop habits, virtues, and ways of seeing things that contribute to the way of life the practices reflect.¹⁷

With these elements in mind, Bass and Dykstra assert that the practices provide the only really manageable way to avoid the problem of “the too big and the too small” in talking about the Christian life.¹⁸ On the one hand, because the Christian life encompasses everything, it is too big to grasp all at once. On the other hand, focusing on individual behaviors causes us to lose perspective through over-attention to detail. Practices, however, provide a way to break the Christian life down into manageable parts and recognized patterns of living that “draw together the shards and pieces of particular

¹⁵Bass and Dykstra, “Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith,” 4-5; and Bass, Practicing Our Faith, 8.

¹⁶Bass, Practicing Our Faith, 7. Bass & Dykstra also point out that practices need to be culturally sensitive and willing to adapt, resisting elements of culture that do not contribute to human well-being, incorporating elements of culture that support the meaning of the practice, and with an awareness of how the evils or limitations embedded in our own personal lives, economic or political structures, might distort the practice so that its outcome is harmful rather than helpful. See Bass and Dykstra, “Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith,” 8; and Bass, Practicing Our Faith, 8, respectively.

¹⁷Bass and Dykstra, “Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith,” 5; and Bass, Practicing Our Faith, 7.

¹⁸Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 17-18.

understandings, beliefs, events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into sets that are capacious and cohesive enough to show how they might guide one into a way of life.”¹⁹

In addition to her collaborative work with Dykstra, Bass has also authored a book on the practice of Sabbath-keeping,²⁰ edited one on Christian practices in general,²¹ and co-edited two other works, one with Don C. Richter on Christian practices for teens,²² and one with Miroslav Volf in the area of theology and the practices.²³ It is in this later work that Dykstra and Bass more explicitly focus on the theological dimensions of *Christian* practices, noting the unique expression that Christian practices take, as a result of the content that informs them and which they in turn help to clarify and shape.²⁴ Significant here is the realization that Christian beliefs are embedded in Christian practices giving them explicit theological content, that they are inseparable from each other, and that they inform and support each other. Through the practices it is God who is addressing fundamental human needs as people participate together, geographically and historically, as a part of the body of Christ sharing God’s story, and entering into relationship with

¹⁹Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 18.

²⁰Dorothy C. Bass, Receiving the Day (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

²¹Dorothy C. Bass, ed., Practicing Our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997).

²²Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds., Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002).

²³Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

²⁴Volf and Bass, eds., Introduction to Practicing Theology, 3.

God in the process.²⁵

As to just how theological content makes its way into a practice, establishes itself, or is discovered there, is the question Katheryn Tanner addresses, suggesting that it is while people reflect on the full implications of what they are practicing that theological insight does, or should, occur.²⁶ It is in the context of this reflection that who we are, who God is, and how we can cooperate with God's work in the world is clarified, the uniqueness of which is seen as Christian practices are reflected upon in contrast to non-Christian forms of practice.²⁷

Tanner's contributions are complemented by the work of Margaret Miles who offers insights from her study of the devotional manuals of the Christian tradition, which seem to be built on the assumption that "altering habits . . . can change perceptions and ideas; insight is at least as likely to follow change as change is to follow insight."²⁸ She points out how, in contrast to contemporary assumptions about change resulting from insight, it is just as valid to assert that participating in practices not only produces insight, but helps create the context in which religious experience occurs and is sustained.²⁹

Amy Plantinga Pauw, drawing on the life of Jonah as a paradigm for the way our

²⁵This line of reasoning is more fully developed in Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 21-28.

²⁶Kathryn Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," in Practicing Theology, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 228.

²⁷Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," 242.

²⁸Margaret R. Miles, Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1988), 2.

²⁹Miles, Practicing Christianity, 91.

spiritual experiences actually unfold, reminds us that the interface between belief and the practices is an imperfect one. As such, our focus needs to remain less toward “heroism and mastery in religious practice . . . [and more] toward the gracious God who works in and through them,”³⁰ reminding us that the context in which Christian practices occur is that of grace.

Finally, Miroslav Volf points out that “at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life.”³¹ While granting that it is possible to accept a belief first and then decide to act accordingly, he contends that most people come to believe because they are either attracted to, or have already become engaged in practices. Yet it is not the practices that ultimately ground what is believed, but what is believed that actually grounds the practices. Volf states:

Theology is not just reflection about how communities of faith use language about God . . . God, not human talk about God, is the proper object of theology . . . God matters for God’s own sake, not for the sake of a preferred way of life. Since we identify who God is through beliefs . . . adequate beliefs about God cannot be ultimately grounded in a way of life; a way of life must be grounded in adequate beliefs about God.³²

Arguing that “Practices are essentially belief -shaped, and beliefs are essentially practice-

³⁰Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps Between Beliefs and Practices,” in Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 33-34.

³¹Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” in Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 247.

³²Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 260.

shaping,”³³ and emphasizing again the inseparability of content and practice, Volf adds yet another significant piece to the work that has been done in the field.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has not yet entered into the current conversation regarding spiritual practices to any significant extent. The purpose of this project is to place the model that emerges out of the combined work of these scholars in dialogue with approaches used by Seventh-day Adventists for preparing people for baptism and/or membership in the church. Currently, there are three major sets of curriculum materials published by the church for use in baptismal classes, representing a variety of formats and teaching approaches.³⁴ But even with the flexibility, variety, and most recently a movement toward incorporating more opportunities for mentoring, prayer, and a shared community journey, the approaches taken are quite consistent in using doctrinal themes as the primary framework for study. The implication would seem to be that what is most crucial to spiritual life in general and to the process of preparing for baptism or church membership in particular, is a clear grasp of the information that describes our faith. From the organization of the material itself, one could conclude that its goal is communicating and instilling information, rather than instilling and nurturing spiritual practices. What this project seeks to do, without neglecting the doctrinal content that is significant to the unique voice of Seventh-day Adventists, is to develop a model

³³Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 254.

³⁴The three major sets of material are: Steve Case, It’s My Choice (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996); Chris Blake, ed., A Reason to Believe (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993); and Troy Fitzgerald, ChristWise: Leader’s Guide for Juniors, Teens and Youth (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002). These will be looked at in more detail as the discussion progresses.

for preparing people for baptism and/or membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church that is designed around spiritual practices as the containers that best define us and hold what we believe.

Scope and Limitations of the Project

As noted previously, this project focuses upon a concept of spiritual practices which emerges out of the foundational work done by scholars in the fields of spirituality, theology, and religious education. Most, if not all, of these contributors are located both physically and intellectually in contexts that are significantly influenced by Christian assumptions and commitments. Because the model that is proposed also shares those influences and characteristics, for our purposes here the use of the term *spiritual practices* will be synonymous with *Christian spiritual practices*.

While the model proposed here may have important implications for the practice of ministry in other denominational settings, the focus here is upon its implementation in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Moreover, the application of this model will be considered primarily in the context of how young people are prepared for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (most often through baptismal classes) and the resources that are used to assist in this process. The principles of the model may apply equally well to adults who are seeking to become members of the church and the various approaches and materials that are used to assist that process, however this project will confine its focus and suggestions to those used in working with young people

beginning in their Junior High and on into their High School years.

Also, while it would be interesting to examine examples of all the materials produced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church since its inception in the mid 1800s to the present to see how thought and approaches may or may not have changed over time, I will only be looking at the three most recent and widely used resources, all of which have been published within the last 15 years. My purpose here is less to trace how we got here as to articulate a model that will help us to engage the present more fully, and move more effectively into the future.

Procedure for Integration

The approach that I am using for proposing the development of a practice-based model for preparing young people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church unfolds as follows. First, based on an examination of work that has been done by scholars in the area of Christian spiritual practices, a model of spiritual practices is developed and explained. Second, this model is placed in conversation with approaches currently in use by Seventh-day Adventists. As a part of this assessment, an instrument has been developed, and pastors in the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists surveyed to determine the extent to which they think in terms of spiritual practices, see them as central to life as a Seventh-day Adventist, and address them when preparing people for baptism and/or church membership.³⁵ Finally, in light of the conversation between the theoretical model and the context of Adventism, a preliminary

³⁵Most people who become members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church do so by being baptized. However, in those cases where they have already been baptized as a part of another Christian community, they often become members by "Profession of Faith."

list of fundamental practices for Seventh-day Adventists is suggested and a model for a practice-based approach to preparing young people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church proposed.

Chapter Outlines

The next chapter examines an emerging model of spiritual practices. It looks at the theoretical foundation that has been laid for understanding spiritual practices, particularly as it has been developed in the work of Craig Dykstra. We will notice how Dykstra builds upon Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical discussion of the significance of practices in the formation of virtue and how nuances from Geertz's work add additional richness to the model. Further, noted is the unique form that this understanding of the practices takes in the context of Christian spiritual formation, particularly how Dykstra places them as central to the life of the church.

The third chapter looks at how this model is further enriched and developed by the contributions of others, particularly through the combined efforts of Miroslav Volf who addresses Christian practices from the standpoint of Christian theology, Dorothy Bass who has sought to make the concept of the practices more accessible to general readers, and a number of other scholars who reflect on this issue. Next, the relationship of the practices to spiritual direction is explored. Finally, various approaches to identifying and classifying Christian practices are examined.

The fourth chapter looks at this emerging understanding of spiritual practices in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly in terms of materials and

approaches used to prepare young people for membership in the church, which typically takes place through Baptism. Using the metaphor of gardening to illustrate the organic nature of the practices, the significance and limitations of content as an organizing principle for an approach is noted in contrast to the advantages of a practice-centered approach. An instrument used to assess perceptions of Adventist pastors in the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in regard to whether they rely on the teaching of doctrinal positions, the transmission of lifestyle patterns, or some combination of both in establishing Adventist identity and nurturing the process of spiritual formation in the preparation of people for membership in the church is referenced. Areas of resonance and resistance to a practice-based approach are also noted.

The fifth chapter proposes suggestions for a model of a practice-based approach to preparation for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Several core spiritual practices of Adventism are suggested, and ways in which they can form the context for dialogue with the fundamental doctrinal beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are explored. Consideration is also given to developing an approach that is sensitive to the context in which the model will seek to establish itself. Sensitivity to issues of gender and, the preservation of both the believer's individual voice and that of the church community voice are noted as well.

CHAPTER 2

AN EMERGING MODEL OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

As noted earlier, defined simply and broadly, spiritual practices are patterns of living that we intentionally participate in from which we draw meaning and which contribute together toward a way of life that is lived in response to an awareness of God's presence. Upholding this canopy of a definition which spreads over the way of life that spiritual practices both reflect and help define are a number of supportive and to some extent interlocking concepts which together help shape the form it takes and provide it with grounding and stability. This chapter will examine various aspects of this support structure as they emerge, primarily, in the work of Clifford Geertz, Alasdair MacIntyre and Craig Dykstra. While I will not deal exhaustively with any of these three writers, I will endeavor to show how significant contributions from each merge together to provide key elements in a solid undergirding for an understanding of the nature of spiritual practices.

Central and formative to the work that has been done in the field, and one of the major pillars supporting this canopy, is the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, which provides both a starting place and a point of reference for the development of the concept of spiritual practices. Using MacIntyre's language as a point of departure, his formulation of practice will be both broadened as we consider the contributions of Clifford Geertz, and focused by the work of Craig Dykstra and his colleagues. Offering a still broad but more detailed definition of practice, MacIntyre writes:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to

achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹

MacIntyre as Expanded by Geertz

A decade before MacIntyre penned this definition of practice, Clifford Geertz was writing about religion as a system of symbols which establishes “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence,”² and which were woven together to form a pattern or a way of life that helped make sense of our existence. Whether or not MacIntyre and Geertz relied upon each other’s work, their descriptions of a patterned human way of life parallel and complement each other in ways that add depth and richness to our understanding of spiritual practice.

The Integral Nature of Practices to Human Life

Significant in MacIntyre’s definition, even though he spends relatively little time developing it, is the assertion that practices involve uniquely *human* activity. Geertz is particularly helpful here in observing that symbols and the cultural patterns related to them (which for our purposes here are at least analogous to practices) rely on “extrinsic sources of information,” which makes this process a decidedly *human* endeavor.³ He

¹MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187.

²Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 91.

³Geertz, 91.

argues that unlike beavers, who by their very nature need only access to an appropriate site and the proper building materials to build a dam (information that is somehow intrinsic for them), people require some sort of source outside of themselves from which they can derive either a model of what a dam looks like, or the principles that one would need to know in order to design and build one.⁴ What Geertz contributes here is the insight that symbols, cultural patterns, or for the purposes of our discussion, practices, are not optional for human life, they are integral and vital.⁵

Practices as Models for and Models of

Furthermore, these patterns may come to us in two forms. The first is that of “models for,” which, like a kind of cultural DNA, give us something similar to a blueprint of what reality looks like so we can build in accordance with it. The second may come to us as “models of,” which describe how various patterns are understood so that they are in harmony with, or become symbols of, the meaning and purpose that is contained in a particular world view. In this way they provide “social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it, and by shaping it to themselves.”⁶ In fact, as Geertz asserts,

It is . . . this double aspect which sets true symbols off from other sorts of significative forms. Models *for* are found . . . through the whole order of nature . . . But models *of* . . . processes which function not to provide

⁴Geertz, 93.

⁵Although as an anthropologist, Geertz’s language and perspectives are somewhat different from those of MacIntyre, Dykstra, Bass, Volf and others who have contributed heavily to the discussion of spiritual practices, his work is clearly traveling over much of the same ground, paralleling and/or complementing their work by adding additional depth and dimension. The symbols and cultural patterns that Geertz describes are, if not equivalent to, closely parallel what is described here as practices.

⁶Geertz, 93.

sources of information in terms of which other processes can be patterned, but to represent those patterned processes as such, to express their structure in an alternative medium – *are much rarer and may perhaps be confined, among living animals, to man.*⁷

Thus, engaging in these symbols, patterns, or practices in this way is also a profoundly human experience.

Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, who build much of their understanding of Christian spiritual practices on MacIntyre's definition, also describe them in a way that seems to parallel, or at least significantly include, the qualities of Geertz' view of symbols.⁸ Because practices address the fundamental needs of human existence, in ways parallel and complementary to Geertz' symbols and patterns of cultural behavior, they see them as necessarily intertwined in living a genuinely meaningful Christian way of life.⁹

So, from a more explicitly Christian perspective, practices may be viewed as involving us in life patterns that reflect both "models for" and "models of" kinds of activities in ways that reflect God's involvement in the world. Sabbath-keeping, for example, may be seen as both a "model for" when reflected in God's command to rest, and as a "model of" when in resting we discover the presence of the God Who gives us

⁷Geertz, 94 (bold italics mine).

⁸It can be argued that in significant ways practices are symbols. Geertz, however, finds it important that we not equate cultural acts with symbols. He insists, "They are not . . . the same thing; or, more precisely the symbolic dimension of social events is . . . itself theoretically abstractable from those events as empirical totalities. There is . . . a difference between building a house and drawing up a plan for building a house, and reading a poem about having children by marriage is not quite the same thing as having children by marriage . . . there is something to be said for not confusing our traffic with symbols with our traffic with objects or human beings, for these latter are not in themselves symbols, however often they may function as such." Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 92. However, Geertz's concerns here are not as helpful if one views "traffic with objects or human beings" as a container which holds, or a context in which a divine presence is encountered. In which case, it would be important not to confuse our "traffic with objects or human beings" with the encounter with the divine, even though in reality the two may not be able to be separated.

⁹Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 4.

Sabbaths. Caring for the poor may be something we both do to model God's activity in the world (model for), and also something in which, in the doing of it, we discover God's presence and activity (models of).¹⁰ These two dimensions are perhaps highlighted the most clearly when the symbol or practice takes the form of the "ritual" of baptism or the Lord's Supper. The practices both guide us into in life patterns that reflect God's grace and love,¹¹ and by participating in them, shape in us an awareness that helps us to recognize God's activity in the world.¹²

Goods Internal to a Practice

A second central element in MacIntyre's definition of practices is expressed in the phrase, "goods internal to a practice." Using illustrations of chess playing and portrait painting, MacIntyre distinguishes between goods that are internal to the practice with those that are external. A good chess player or artist may experience various levels of fame or fortune as a result of what they are doing, but these are goods that are largely external to the practice of playing chess or creating a work of art. In fact, fame and fortune might come as a result of any number of activities, and are not necessarily tied to chess or portrait painting. Goods internal to a practice however, can only be had by

¹⁰"...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40, NIV).

¹¹Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 6.

¹²Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," 7.

taking part in the activity itself, and do not require external goods in order to be genuine.¹³ These internal goods are what lie at the heart of what MacIntyre is talking about. There is a way in which a chess player enters into the experience of playing chess with a desire to increase skill and play well that becomes its own reason for participating and which cannot be experienced in any other way than actually entering into the experience. No matter how diligently one studies chess, or how thoroughly and accurately it is described, there is a kind of content, the actual experience of chess playing, that can only be had by actually engaging in the game itself. What is more, there is a sense in which, as one enters into the game when it is being played well, that the player both becomes and experiences becoming a part of a larger community of other chess players who have shared the same experience, whether they are alive today or are now a part of the history of the game.¹⁴

Excellence, Community and Complexity

Also characteristic of these practices from which internal goods are derived are certain inherent standards of excellence and a need for adherence to the rules. Chess is

¹³MacIntyre comments, "There are always alternative ways for achieving such [external] goods, and their achievement is never to be had *only* by engaging in some particular kind of practice. On the other hand, there are goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind." MacIntyre, 188 (original italics). Also, "the cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues and become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition." MacIntyre, 196.

¹⁴What is more, MacIntyre would argue that we have to accept the virtues of justice, courage, and honesty as central to real participation in practices. "For us not to accept these, to be willing to cheat . . . at chess, so far bars us from achieving the standards of excellence or the goods internal to the practice that it renders the practice pointless except as a device for achieving external goods." MacIntyre, 191.

both something that must be played by the rules and something at which one can excel. It is also something that I can, and perhaps to some extent at least must, learn from others who are better players than I am. While I benefit greatly from thoroughly studying the rules of the game, the way I actually enter into the experience of chess playing is to actually play with others, particularly those who may have been playing longer or are better players than I am. In fact, according to MacIntyre, “its goods can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners.”¹⁵ In other words, these standards of excellence are learned in the context of a community.

We may parrot individualistic sayings on occasion, but . . . in acquiring these qualities, we submit to the authority of people experienced in the practices by taking their advice and imitating their actions. Think of any high-school orchestra, class play, or ballet association. How much room for unbridled individualism do you find? Rather little. The scene is likely to be dominated by a single figure of authority and strict requirements determined by the cooperative pursuit of common ends.¹⁶

Practice, then, is much more than activity. It is a complex, participatory interaction with its own standards of excellence and internal richness. Taking long showers, for example, because it is not sufficiently complex nor really has much in the way of standards of excellence associated with it, would not be considered a practice.¹⁷ However the practice of “honoring the body,” while it might include showering, is much richer and more complex, encompassing far more than simply getting clean. While, as Stout notes, MacIntyre is somewhat imprecise in indicating exactly where the line is drawn that distinguishes an activity (playing tic-tac-toe for example) from a genuine

¹⁵MacIntyre, 191.

¹⁶Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, 271. Chapter 12 of Stout’s book contains a helpful discussion of MacIntyre’s definition of practice.

¹⁷Stout, 268.

practice (playing chess), the qualities that constitute a genuine practice, namely complexity, standards of excellence, and the focus on internal rather than external goods in the context of a community, are still quite helpful.¹⁸

Practices Embodied in Institutions

Even though it is not explicit in the definition with which we began, it is significant that in his discussion of practices, MacIntyre points out that they are often embodied in institutions.¹⁹ While on the one hand it is important that we not confuse the two (chess is a practice, chess clubs are institutions),²⁰ it is quite often through institutions that the practices are expressed. In fact, MacIntyre argues that practices cannot be sustained for any length of time without them.²¹ What is problematic here is that because institutions tend to be heavily involved in the trading of external goods, there is a very real danger of the internal goods of the practice being made secondary. This is why, he argues, that the exercise of the virtues is so important and central. “The ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which the virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of the practice.”²² While institutional embodiment is needed, in order to keep the nature of institutions and their tendency towards focusing on external goods from subverting the

¹⁸Stout, 268.

¹⁹Stout, 274.

²⁰MacIntyre, 194.

²¹MacIntyre, 194.

²²MacIntyre, 195.

practice itself, it is vital that whatever structure is used to support the growth of a practice, that it be shaped by the nature of the internal goods that flow from the practice itself. Both are needed, but internal goods need to be primary. The order matters.

Motivations and Moods in Practices

Although it is beyond the scope of this project to fully explore all of the details of MacIntyre's rationale here, it is worth noting that complimenting the definition of practice he offers, is his assertion that practices must be tied to some overall conception of what the whole of human life is really all about. Without that, practices that otherwise might meet all the criteria of his definition could turn out to be evil. Not everything that flows from what could be considered a virtue, or an expression of a virtue, is necessarily good.²³ According to MacIntyre, practices need standards, a reference point, or some kind of overall conception of reality against which they can be viewed and evaluated. These reference points are significant not only because they provide criteria against which a practice can be judged, but also because they provide motivation and rationale for participation in a practice.

Returning again to his definition of religion in which he references "powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence,"²⁴ Geertz provides some helpful ways to think about how criteria and standards contribute toward what it is that inclines us toward participating in

²³MacIntyre, 198-203. He goes on to develop this more fully in the chapter 15 which follows the references cited here.

²⁴Geertz, 91.

practices. He describes motivations as persisting tendencies, chronic inclinations, or liabilities to perform certain types of actions or have certain kinds of feelings.²⁵ For example,

On hearing that a man is vain [i.e., motivated by vanity] we expect him to behave in certain ways, namely to talk a lot about himself, to cleave to the society of the eminent, to reject criticisms, to seek the footlights and to disengage himself from conversations about the merits of others . . . To be vain is to *tend to act in these and innumerable other kindred ways*.²⁶

While motives have a sense of direction and move toward a goal, moods, by contrast, while they may vary in intensity, do not seem to have anywhere in particular to go – either settling in, or lifting, like fog, for reasons that are not always entirely clear.²⁷ Motivations have to do with what we are seeking. Moods arise out of what we perceive or experience. “We interpret motives in terms of their consummations, but we interpret moods in terms of their sources.”²⁸

Placing Geertz’ observations here in the context of practices provides a way of detecting and tracing both of these movements. First, practices arise at least partially out of a desire to give expression to things that we value and have identified ourselves with in ways that strive to be consistent with those things (motivations). The convictions or virtues which seek to find expression, and which, in the context of Christian practices, spring from a response to grace,²⁹ correlate with Geertz’s motivations. Similarly, his

²⁵Geertz, 96-97.

²⁶Geertz, 96-97 (italics mine).

²⁷Geertz, 96-97.

²⁸Geertz, 97.

²⁹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 75.

description of moods, which though not necessarily equivalent to, are at least in close relationship with MacIntyre's "goods internal to the practice," are not simply free-floating emotions of elation or depression, but the kind of experience that grows out of what motivates them, and because some things can only be fully known by actually engaging them, are in some ways experientially unique to them. As Geertz points out, "Charity becomes Christian charity when it is enclosed in a conception of God's purposes, optimism is Christian optimism when it is grounded in a particular conception of God's nature."³⁰

Practices Address What is Ultimately Real

Another key element of Geertz's definition of religion which further broadens MacIntyre's initial formulation, and which is involved in the process of "formulating conceptions of a general order of existence,"³¹ addresses itself more directly to the issue of finding meaning in human life. From Geertz's perspective this is significant, not only because we expect religion to address itself to what is ultimately real about God and the cosmos, but also because it is vital to what defines us as human. Having already touched upon this point in his earlier comments about symbols being vital to human life, he returns to it again by pointing out that,

The thing we seem least able to tolerate is a threat to our powers of conception, a suggestion that our ability to create, grasp and use symbols may fail us, for were this to happen, we would be more helpless, as I have already pointed out, than the beavers. . . [without this we would become] a

³⁰Geertz, 98.

³¹Geertz, 98.

kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction or power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions. Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability [which is why a threat to this] . . . raises within him the gravest sort of anxiety.³²

Geertz points out three areas of fear that religion must address in order to deal with the potential chaos that would erupt if we did not have a system of making sense out of life. The first of these is the fear that life might not be interpretable.³³ It is important to us, not so much that everything be adequately explained to us, though this is preferable, but that somehow, even if we do not fully understand them, that things could be explained. We do not tolerate well things that happen that are of such a nature that they threaten our ability to make sense out of our world, or which raises “the uncomfortable question of whether the beliefs . . . [are] workable, [or our] standard of truth . . . valid.”³⁴

Second, Geertz points us to the problem of suffering. The issue here is not so much that of how to avoid it, as it is how to suffer in such a way that meaning in life is not lost. “Where the intellectual aspects . . . are a matter affirming the ultimate explicability of experience, the more affective aspects are a matter of affirming its ultimate sufferableness.”³⁵ For Geertz, the task here is to provide “a mode of action through which it [suffering] can be expressed, being expressed understood, and being

³²Geertz, 99.

³³Geertz, 100.

³⁴Geertz, 101. Geertz also points out, quoting from Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 287, that “[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe – the ‘uncanny,’ as it is popularly called.” Geertz, 99.

³⁵Geertz, 104.

understood, endured.”³⁶

Third, Geertz takes us from the problem of suffering to the problem of evil, which raises questions about the limits of our moral insight.³⁷

Where the problem of suffering is concerned with threats to our ability to put our “undisciplined squads of emotion” into some sort of soldierly order, the problem of evil is concerned with threats to our ability to make sound moral judgements.³⁸

The problem of evil, suffering, and interpretability are all bound together by the same kind of fear, and seek resolution in the same way. Geertz describes this solution as,

The formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience. The effort is not to deny the undeniable . . . but to deny that there are inexplicable events, that life is unendurable, and that justice is a mirage. . . What is important is that . . . elusiveness be accounted for, that it be not the result of the fact that there are no such principles, explanations, or forms, that life is absurd and the attempt to make moral, intellectual, or emotional sense out of experience is bootless.³⁹

What Geertz describes here, engaging in patterns of life that reinforce a deep and profound sense of meaning and purpose, is a vital part of what the practices seek to do.

Practices Transmit Belief

Implicit in MacIntyre’s definition, in which the “goods involved” are “systematically extended,” when applied to religious faith, is the issue of how it is that the

³⁶Geertz, 105.

³⁷Geertz, 100, 106.

³⁸Geertz, 106.

³⁹Geertz, 108.

way of life that is expressed and embodied in practices is transmitted to others. Helpful here is Geertz' perspective on how it is that one comes to belief. Noting that the experience of "bafflement, pain, and moral paradox – the problem of meaning – is one of the things that drives men toward belief in gods . . . it is not the basis upon which those beliefs rest,"⁴⁰ he asserts instead that "the basic axiom underlying what we may perhaps call 'the religious perspective' is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe."⁴¹ This happens not by detached inquiry and observation, but by engaging the issues of life on a deeper level as one seeks to express what is ultimately real as they are examined in light of a bigger picture of reality.⁴² Again, while his comments focus primarily on religious ritual, they also parallel the broader and more encompassing lifestyle patterns of practices. He writes,

For it is in ritual – that is, consecrated behavior – that this conviction that . . . religious directives are sound is somehow generated . . . the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another. In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.⁴³

⁴⁰Geertz, 109.

⁴¹Geertz, 110.

⁴²Geertz, 112.

⁴³Geertz, 118. He goes on to say, "The acceptance of authority that underlies the religious perspective that the ritual embodies thus flows from the enactment of the ritual itself. By inducing a set of moods and motivations – and ethos – and defining an image of cosmic order – a world view – by means of a single set of symbols, the performance makes the model for and model of aspects of religious belief mere transpositions of one another." Geertz, 118.

In the final part of his definition of religion Geertz explains "that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic," reflecting his observation that participation in rituals (or I would suggest by extension, the practices) shapes the way we see and engage all aspects of our lives as we live out the implications of the ritual, although, Geertz observes, "no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments." Geertz, 110. It is here perhaps, that one of the areas of tension between his view of religion and the view of spiritual life that one

MacIntyre as Focused by Dykstra

Even as the contributions of Geertz add breadth and depth to the concepts which arise out of MacIntyre's foundational definition of practices in ways that parallel and complement MacIntyre, Craig Dykstra, and his colleagues intentionally build upon, focus, and in some ways shape to fit, his definition to the specific context of Christian spiritual life. For example, using the image of baseball in much the same way as MacIntyre uses chess playing,⁴⁴ Dykstra unpacks his understanding of the practices in ways that are in most respects identical to MacIntyre. First, he asserts that baseball is an intelligible and purposeful *human* activity that makes use of concepts and symbols in ways only humans can.⁴⁵ Second, it is something that human beings actually *do*. There is no baseball if real people are not out there actually playing the game.⁴⁶ Third, baseball is not something that can be done alone, it must be done together in *community*.⁴⁷ Fourth, baseball draws upon a rich history of *established rules*, roles, and previous games played that makes the game recognizable across the boundaries of time and place. Because of

finds in the models of Dykstra, Bass, and others surfaces. To the extent that he makes too sharp a distinction between what he calls the every-day world and the religious world, his view clearly diverges from that which sees the Christian Practices as defining and infusing all aspects of life, and seeking to sustain that stance.

⁴⁴Actually, MacIntyre also alludes to the image of baseball to illustrate his point, (MacIntyre, 190), but does not develop it to the extent that Dykstra does.

⁴⁵Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 68.

⁴⁶Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 68.

⁴⁷Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 68. It is also helpful to note that you do not necessarily have to be in a group to be part of a practicing community. You can be praying in solitude, but still involved in a practice of the church community in which others are praying in solitude as well as a part of a "praying church." See Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 43.

this it can be both taught and learned.⁴⁸ Fifth, it is sufficiently *complex* that in order to fully appreciate the game you have to work at learning and understanding the rules and developing the skills necessary to play well.⁴⁹

Continuing to reflect MacIntyre's development, Dykstra goes on to point out that the "moral goods and standards of excellence"⁵⁰ of a practice are intrinsic (internal according to MacIntyre) to the practice itself. In baseball there are levels of skill at which the game may be played with standards of excellence that can be aspired to. The joy of playing really well is one of the intrinsic rewards for those who love to play. But even more than that, by playing well, our very participation in the game results in the intrinsic rewards being more fully realized. Playing well is not only what we bring to the game. Playing the game well actually does something to us that deepens our experience of the game and the intrinsic rewards it brings. It is not so much that when we have grown enough, we are then able to participate, but that it is by the very act of participating that we grow. Out of this, Dykstra offers a restated, and perhaps more accessible, definition of practices.

In sum, then, practices are those cooperative human activities through which we, as individuals and as communities, grow and develop in moral character and substance. They have built up over time and, through experience and testing, have developed patterns of reciprocal expectations among participants. They are ways of doing things together in which and through which human life is given direction, meaning, and significance, and through which our very capacities to do good things well are increased. And because they are shared, patterned and ongoing, they can

⁴⁸Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 68-69.

⁴⁹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 69.

⁵⁰Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 69.

be taught. . . We can pass them on from one generation to the next.⁵¹

What we pass on in the practices is an embodied faith – a way of living – which, like

baseball, “requires playing the game, making the moves, developing the skills, thinking it through and practicing it over and over again to do it well.”⁵²

Theological Focus for Christian Practices

Having acknowledged the points MacIntyre makes, that the goods internal to a practice can only be fully realized by fully engaging the practice itself at its best, and that some of the criteria by which a practice is judged are internal or built into the practice itself – thus bearing moral weight, Dykstra goes beyond MacIntyre by suggesting that Christian practices bear epistemological weight as well.⁵³ That is to say that through the practices we become aware in an intuitive-like way of some things that would not be accessible to us otherwise. In ways analogous to how “a fine batter comes to ‘know’ what a ball will do, and his body will ‘know’ what to do to hit it,”⁵⁴ we develop a perceptiveness that not only deepens our insight, but actually makes us aware of something more. When applied to Christian spiritual practices, that “something more” includes the reality of God’s presence in the midst of participating in the pattern of living that the practice embodies. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, writing together about this

⁵¹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 69-70.

⁵²Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 71.

⁵³Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 45.

⁵⁴Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 45-46.

issue, state, “Our present understanding of practices differs from MacIntyre’s account in *After Virtue* in that ours is now theological and thus normed not only internally but also through the responsive relationship of Christian practices to God.”⁵⁵

But there is more to it than that. Dykstra argues that there is something else that is unique about Christian practice, even though it may parallel practices in other religious systems in many significant ways, which has to do with the unique set of assumptions that Christian practice is built upon. It is here, according to Dykstra, that, “For all the usefulness of the baseball analogy, the practice of faith is in one crucial respect not like the practice of baseball – or the practice of medicine or politics, for that matter. For all its similarities, the practice of Christian faith is fundamentally different from other practices.”⁵⁶ What makes it different is the uniqueness of the gospel story upon which Christianity is based.

Grace-based Practice

At the heart of the gospel story, and therefore central to the shaping of genuinely Christian spiritual practices, is the concept of grace. Grace is the celebration of the understanding that, in spite of what the worst about us might be, the best that life has to offer us comes to us primarily as gift, not payment or reward. (Even when payment or reward may be involved, the centrality of gift remains primary). However, because the idea of excellence generally focuses mainly on exalting human achievement, whereas faith focuses on acknowledging the graciousness of God’s gift, using the language of

⁵⁵Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practice,” 21.

⁵⁶Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 75.

excellence in connection with the practice of faith can at best feel a bit awkward, and at worst be contradictory.

Dykstra suggests that one of the ways that the uniqueness of Christian practice emerges is through the nature of the kinds of stories that define the Christian way of life. This he illustrates by contrasting the idea of a hero with that of a saint.⁵⁷ Many human practices call for a kind of excellence that involves mastery over forces that in some way threaten our safety or well-being. The forces may be military or political. In the case of medicine, those of disease or illness. Technology contends with the forces of the natural world and the principles of science. Athletes contend with the limitations of their bodies and the strengths of their competitors. “Most of the stories by which human beings live are heroic in character. They are stories about mastery over the forces of human evil and the threatening powers of nature. . . in such narratives, human mastery becomes ultimate virtue and the mark of excellence.”⁵⁸ These are the stories of heroes.

Christian practice, however, revolves around a different kind of defining story. Human achievement, while still valued, has a different meaning and does not occupy center stage.

The human task is not fundamentally mastery. It is rather the right use of gifts graciously bestowed by a loving God for the sake of the good that God intends – and ultimately assures. . . . This story’s fundamental fact is that the everlasting arms of a gracious and loving God sustain the universe. So our basic task is not mastery and control. It is instead trust and grateful receptivity. Our exemplars are not *heroes*; they are *saints*. *Our epitome is not excellence; our honor is in faithfulness.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 75-76.

⁵⁸Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 76.

⁵⁹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 76 (italics mine).

It is in this “strangeness”⁶⁰ of the Christian story that, according to Dykstra, we find the unique character of the Christian practices. Thus, while practices are taught and are things that we can learn to do well, our task is not so much to master them, as to allow the practices to lead us into a mode of trust and receptivity to God’s grace for us, and as our lives are shaped by them, allow them to guide us as we live out that reality in the way we interact with others. Dykstra describes them not as “activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives . . . [but as] patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us.”⁶¹ In other words, practices are things we do that create opportunities or spaces in which we can become more fully aware of God’s presence, and then live more fully in that awareness.

Common Distortions of Practices

The difficulty of maintaining practices focused on grace in a world that often encourages other rhythms and outlooks on life both underscores their necessity in terms

⁶⁰In regard to this strangeness, Dykstra, on page 77, quotes the work of Edward Farley. “A certain ‘strangeness,’ a certain ‘peculiarity’ marks everything which concerns in any way the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This means that everything in the church, including the church itself, is touched with this strangeness. Talking about the Gospel is strange . . . Worshiping and praying have their peculiarities, and they are not exactly identical with these phenomena in all religions. Everything introduced into the church and its concerns is bathed in this strangeness.” See Edward Farley, “Does Christian Education Need the Holy Spirit? Part II,” *Religious Education* 60 (November–December 1965): 432.

⁶¹Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 66. Put in slightly different language, Dykstra and Bass express it like this: “While the point of most human practices is the achievement of some form of mastery over a specific kind of conflict or chaos, Christian practitioners do not master death in the practice of dying well, or enmity in the practice of forgiveness, or sound in the practice of singing our lives to God. Instead, in trying to engage in such practices faithfully and well, they seek to enter more fully into the receptivity and responsiveness, to others and to God, that characterize Christ and all who share in the new creation.” Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 28.

of nourishing a genuinely Christian way of living, and alerts us to the need to be vigilant in protecting them from erosion by those aspects of culture that undermine them.

Granting that even at our best, we participate in them imperfectly and make our own share of contributions to the distortions that so easily work their way into our patterns of living, we nevertheless need to be aware of the subtle and not so subtle ways in which practices can be subverted, blunted, rendered ineffective, or perhaps even become harmful. Dykstra notes four specific ways that Christian practices have become distorted by the way they have been handled in both the academy and the parish.⁶² He suggests that to the extent that the practices have become individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract, they lead us away from the definition of practice that he has been developing.

Individualistic configurations of the practices assume a picture of a practitioner (usually clergy) doing something to or for others, perhaps in the presence of others.⁶³ The one performing the activity is the practitioner, while the others that are present are there to receive what the effect of what the practitioner does. Worship, for example, becomes a setting in which religious consumers come to have something done to or for them by a religious professional, rather than an opportunity for a community to gather together and respond to God in worship. What becomes neglected, if not in some cases lost, in individualistic configurations is the realization that practices are something that communities do together as a part of a larger tradition.

Closely connected with individualism is the idea that what practitioners do, they

⁶²Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 35-41.

⁶³Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," 36.

should do well.⁶⁴ The desire for skill and competency when it comes to things that matter to us does not sound like an unreasonable expectation. However, when we allow our way of thinking about Christian practice to become too closely connected to the idea of “making things happen” or the level of skill with which they happen, we tend to evaluate them on the basis of whether or not they produce the effects we want at the level of skill we expect, rather than upon the genuineness and authenticity of the process itself. Once “practice is procedure, its value depends upon its utility,”⁶⁵ which leads us toward a kind of cause-effect style of thinking that makes practice a technique that we use to change things. This results in shifting the focus towards extrinsic rather than intrinsic goods.

Once the main focus of a practice is upon the product it produces, what Dykstra identifies as a *technological* mind-set, the focus begins to shift away from the past as the flow of a way of life that we need to stay connected with and from which we continue to learn, to simply something we selectively consult only for the purpose of discovering what we can glean from it that will speak to our problems in the present. “([O]ne may do the same kind of thing in sufficiently similar situations), but each practice is essentially a singular event, beginning and ending upon its intervention into each situation. Practice has no internal history of its own.”⁶⁶ In this way of thinking, the practices are *a-historical*, essentially containing no more than *abstract* principles or guidelines that can be distilled out of the history and context in which they arose. What matters is the theory you can

⁶⁴Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 37.

⁶⁵Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 39.

⁶⁶Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 40.

extract rather than continuity of the practice itself and the way of life it represents.⁶⁷

It is over against the views that reduce them to merely functional techniques or activities, that Dykstra offers his view of the practices as the containers that hold and shape our lives of faith. “Our identities as persons are constituted by practices and the knowledge and relationships they mediate. Some of these are so central to who we are that we cannot give them up without our very existence undergoing transformation. Correlatively, communal life is constituted by practices. Communities do not just engage in practices; in a sense, they are practices.”⁶⁸ In other words, the practices are not just something that Christians do, they are things that define who we are, and provide the context in which we respond to the God who is revealed in the midst of them. In fact, “after a time, the primary point about the practices is no longer that they are something we do. Instead, they become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do . . . This is not an easy point to make, but it is key.”⁶⁹ He goes on to suggest:

Suppose that practices central to Christian life are conditions under which various kinds and forms of knowledge emerge – knowledge of God, of ourselves, and of the world . . . Suppose that through such practices, the virtues and character and wisdom of the communities and individuals who participate in them are formed. Suppose that through participation in practices . . . the community of faith comes . . . to awareness of and participation in the creative and redemptive activity of God in the world. If these suppositions are sustainable, practices deserve a pivotal place in Christian formation, theological study, and theological education.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 41.

⁶⁸Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 47.

⁶⁹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 56.

⁷⁰Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 49-50.

Dykstra suggests that in order for Christian practices to take this central place, they need to be identified, studied, and actually entered into in a way that is consistent with what we have noticed about them thus far.⁷¹ This raises the question of how we go about identifying what the practices of the faith are, perhaps how they emerge in various settings, and certainly, how we can engage them in a way that does not compromise or undermine the realities they seek to reflect and to shape. Dykstra himself suggests some possible lists in some of his works,⁷² but goes on to state, “The point here is neither to recommend a specific list of practices nor a particular way of identifying and studying them. The point is to call for their recognition and to suggest their centrality in Christian life and, hence, in theological study and theological education.”⁷³ Having said that, however, he nevertheless leaves us with an implied challenge. The implications of what he suggests inevitably calls us, as a part of the church in whatever form it may take throughout the world, to clearly identify those practices that define both those things that unite us, and those which give individual faith communities their unique identities and

⁷¹Some of the questions Dykstra suggests that we need to raise include, “What are the conditions under which certain practices can have the power to create new perceptions and bring us into touch with the realities that are central to our spiritual lives?” “What have been the practices by which Christian life in the world has been sustained across the centuries?” “What have people come to see and know and be through participation in these practices?” See Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 47-48.

⁷²Dykstra’s works contain two such lists. First, worshipping God together, telling the Christian story to one another, interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church’s experience, praying together and alone, confessing our sin to one another, tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging each other in our vocations, serving and witnessing together, giving generously, suffering with and for one another, providing hospitality and care to friends and strangers, listening and talking attentively to one another, struggling together to understand the context in which we live, criticizing and resisting powers and patterns that are destructive to humans and creation, working together to maintain and create social structures that sustain life in accordance to God’s will. Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 42. Second, interpreting scripture, worship and prayer, confession and reconciliation, service, witness, social criticism, and the mutual bearing of suffering. Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 48.

⁷³Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 49.

contributions to make, and allow them to take their place as being central to the life of the church.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICES IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Chapter 2 noted many of the significant pillars supporting the canopy of the *practices* or the *patterns of life* which spread over and enfold the way of living that is, at least in a Christian context, lived in response to an awareness of God's presence. Attention will now be given to how these patterns can be viewed in a manner that is more explicit and accessible to those who are actually engaged in attempting to live in a way that reflects their centrality. How our understanding of them is further enriched through theological reflection, how spiritual direction provides a particularly helpful illustration of the dynamics of the practices, as well as the various ways that other Christian practices have been identified and classified. Put more simply, the question is, "What are the practices and how do they work in a Christian context?"

Practices Address Fundamental Human Needs

As previously noted, Geertz points out the important role that religious practices play in our search for meaning and an understanding of what is ultimately real. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra tap into a similar, if not identical, flow of thought as they speak of the role of practices in satisfying fundamental human needs that are expressed as spiritual hunger.

Ours is a time of widespread spiritual hunger. People seem to be searching for something, though they often have a hard time articulating exactly what it is. Sometimes it seems that the search is for meaning . . . [but] Whatever they call it, many people feel that something is missing from their lives. Yet it is clearly not some *thing* they are lacking. The

search is not for more but for *kind*, for a qualitative dimension. It is for a kind of life, a way of living, a way of being and doing that is truly alive to God, neighbor, and self – a way of life that, to use a biblical phrase, chooses life.¹

Here we also find Dykstra's definition of the practices being expressed in more accessible language as he and Dorothy Bass work together.² Still very much in line with Dykstra's earlier definition, but emphasizing practices as being both reflective of fundamental human needs and an integral part of daily life, Bass offers an explanation of practices as

those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life. Reflecting on practices as they have been shaped in the context of Christian faith leads us to encounter the possibility of a faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom. And here is the really important point: this encounter can change how we live each day.³

All of the essential elements of Dykstra's understanding are clearly in place. Activities are shared in community; the practices all need to be done (woven) together; they are done together over time as a part of a faithful way of life; and they address fundamental human needs. There is no substantive difference between Bass' and Dykstra's view, except that Bass' work seems to reflect a desire to make the concepts more accessible to the reader. What emerges out of their combined efforts is an even more concise definition as together they define *Christian Practices* as the "things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of

¹Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 1 (original italics).

²Writings which are representative of their collaboration include Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith"; Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith"; and Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices."

³Bass, Practicing Our Faith, xi.

God's active presence for the life of the world."⁴ Despite any stylistic differences, for all practical purposes, when it comes to their view of the practices, it is probably safe to say that Bass and Dykstra are virtually the same.

Key Elements of Practices

Working from their definition, and seeking to express the characteristics of the practices in more accessible language, Dykstra and Bass distill out nine key elements of the practices. For greater clarity and to eliminate what appears to me to be unnecessary overlap, I have combined two of these reducing the number to seven.⁵

The first of these is the notion that, because practices address fundamental human needs, they are not peripheral or optional activities, but are patterns of thinking and action that matter a great deal when it comes to living our lives fully and richly.⁶

Second, when we take part in the practices, we cooperate with God's purposes and activities in the world. We join God in His work⁷ by addressing fundamental human needs through concrete human acts. For example, "Young men traveling alone do not need to be greeted with a sermon on hospitality; they need to be beckoned inside, given

⁴Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 2.

⁵There are a variety of ways to number and express these characteristics. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, for example, list only five, and explain some of the concepts not included in their list in other places. See Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 108-09. In Bass and Dykstra's list, number six concerns practices involving us in life patterns that reflect God's activity in the world, which I combined with number two, which addresses us joining God in his work. Their number seven which addresses the need to be aware of evil in our own lives or in structures that can cause practices to be distorted in ways that can become harmful I combine with number five which involves a sensitivity to resisting elements of culture that do not contribute to human well-being.

⁶Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 4.

⁷Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 5.

some supper, and shown where to sleep.”⁸ This is done, not primarily because an external benefit is derived from it, but because it is the kind of thing God and God’s people do, and we are joining God in His work. Practices involve us in life patterns that reflect God’s grace and love. As we realize the extent to which what we do in our daily lives is intertwined with what God is doing in the world, both what we do and who we are experience transformation.⁹

Third, it is through participation in the practices that we come to a kind of knowing and awareness that would be inaccessible to us if we did not participate in them.¹⁰ There is a sense in which it is only by extending hospitality to a stranger, or entering into the keeping of Sabbath, that we can really know what the experience of hospitality or Sabbath-keeping is all about. There is a kind of knowledge that is derived in this way that cannot be had otherwise.

Fourth, practices are done with each other and for each other across social, geographical and historical boundaries. We participate with others in our local communities, with others who engage in similar practices around the world, and with those who have been engaging in them throughout history. We discover that a practice is “ancient, and larger than you are; it weaves you together with other people in doing things none of us could do alone. But each practice is also ever new, taking fresh form each day as it subtly adapts to find expression in every neighborhood and land.”¹¹ Even though the

⁸Dykstra and Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” 6.

⁹Dykstra and Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” 8.

¹⁰Bass and Dykstra, “Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith,” 5.

¹¹Dykstra and Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” 7.

expression may have a contemporary form, the core of the shared practice still expresses a connection with those who have gone before us in different times and in different settings.¹²

Fifth, practices need to be culturally sensitive and adaptable, resistant to elements of the culture that do not contribute to human well-being, while perhaps incorporating other elements of the culture that support the practice.¹³ This includes the need to think critically about how the evils or limitations embedded in our personal lives, or in economic or political structures, might distort a practice so that its outcome is harmful rather than helpful.¹⁴

Sixth, much like musicians who continue to take lessons and spend time practicing, participating in the practices shapes and grows us by developing habits, virtues, and ways of seeing things that contribute to the way of life the practices reflect. Because of this, practices are things that we can learn to do well.¹⁵

Seventh, all of the practices of daily life come into focus in worship where we become more fully aware of the reality toward which the practices point.¹⁶

In public worship, the Christian community takes all these gestures and does them on a grand scale. We use the familiar elements of everyday life – food, water, oil, embrace, word – to proclaim and celebrate what God is doing in the world and in our lives. Worship distills the Christian meaning of the practices and holds them up for the whole community to see. We confess our failure to do them well, receive assurance of God's grace, hear

¹²Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 5.

¹³Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 6.

¹⁴Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," 8.

¹⁵Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," 7.

¹⁶Bass and Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith," 7.

stories and speak words . . . and go out strengthened to live more faithfully.¹⁷

Finally, with all of these elements in mind, Bass and Dykstra assert that the practices provide the only really manageable way to think and talk about the Christian life. This avoids what they describe as the problem of the “too big and the too small.”¹⁸ On the one hand, trying to talk about the Christian way of life as a whole, because it encompasses everything, is simply too big to wrap one’s mind around all at once. On the other hand, focusing on individual behaviors, events, or ideas tends to fragment our lives in ways that can lead to imbalance or to losing sight of the forest for the trees as we fail to see the larger picture that the smaller pieces need to be integrated into. The patterns of life that the practices represent however, provide units of wholeness that are both distinctive and yet overlapping as they mesh together to form a distinctive way of life.

Rather than speak of a Christian way of life as a whole . . . we shall speak of the “Christian Practices” that together constitute a way of life abundant . . . Thinking of a way of life as made up of a constitutive set of practices breaks a way of life down into parts that are small enough to be amenable to analysis . . . At the same time, practices are not too small: each Christian practice is large enough to permit us to draw together the shards and pieces of particular understandings, beliefs, events, behaviors, actions, relationships, inquiries, and skills into sets that are capacious and cohesive enough to show how they might guide one into a way of life.¹⁹

Christ-Centered Practices

While much of what has been said up to this point about the practices could in

¹⁷Dykstra and Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” 9.

¹⁸Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 17-18.

¹⁹Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 18.

most cases find application in a variety of belief systems, as was alluded to earlier, both the purpose of this project, and the intent of Bass' and Dykstra's work, is to focus primarily upon *Christian* practices, and how the unique content and expression of *Christian* faith shapes and is shaped by them.²⁰ In fact, the uniqueness of the content in Christian faith as a vital element in Christian practices is a realization that has come more clearly into focus as Bass and Dykstra have continued their work. Reflecting on their joint efforts which appeared in Practicing Our Faith, Bass and Dykstra later commented that their definition of the practices "would be strengthened by the addition of the words 'in Jesus Christ' at the end, which would clarify the character and content of the active divine presence that is so central to . . . [their] understanding of practices."²¹ This clarification highlights an important and central element in their thinking. There are things that all people do simply as a part of being human that Christian practices include. We make decisions, raise children, care for the sick, and bury the dead, but when these things are done in response to, and with the awareness that, the God revealed in Jesus Christ is present in the midst of these things, we do them differently.²² For all their similarities with practices of other faith traditions, Christian practices have a unique expression, based on the content that informs them, and which they in turn, help to clarify and shape.

This raises the issue that Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass address in the collection of essays they edited together and published as Practicing Theology: Beliefs

²⁰See the section on "Grace-based Practices" on page 36 of this project.

²¹Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 18; and Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 66-67.

²²Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 18.

and Practices in Christian Life. In the introduction to this book, Bass comments:

[the book Practicing Our Faith] situated practices within a Christian theological interpretation of God and God's relation to the world, but it offered little attention to specific Christian beliefs or to the process of reflection by which Christian people sustain the integrity of these beliefs, whether as academic theologians or as laypeople negotiating meaning in the midst of life's complexities. To rectify this omission is one of the purposes of Practicing Theology.²³

Embedded within Christian Practices are Christian beliefs. Whether or not the practice comes first or the belief that is embedded in the practice, the point that is most essential to make here is that, regardless of sequence, the two exist in an inseparable relationship to each other, each informing and supporting the other. To try to separate them ultimately destroys both. It is the two of them existing together that constitutes the "way of life" that Christian practices both express and help shape. Turning their gaze in the direction of the content that is embedded in the practices, Bass and Dykstra comment,

when we refer to Christian practices we have something normative and theological in mind. Each element in our approach presumes that Christian practices are set in a world created and sustained by a just and merciful God, who is now in the midst of reconciling this world through Christ. . . . When they participate in such practices, Christian people are taking part in God's work . . . and thereby growing into a deeper knowledge of God and creation.²⁴

Addressing the practices from a more intentional theological perspective, several significant elements surface in their approach. First, the fundamental human needs and conditions that are addressed in Christian practices are understood as "human activities in and through which people cooperate with God in addressing the needs of one another

²³Volf and Bass, introduction to Practicing Theology, 3.

²⁴Dykstra and Bass, "Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 21.

and creation.”²⁵ The unique Christian content gives distinct meaning and purpose to the practice. For example, the practices of Sabbath-keeping and hospitality provide ways to embody, and perhaps support the embodiment of, a lifestyle that reflects God’s purposes and activity as it opposes materialistic and market-driven influences and frees people to live more fully and generously. Whether or not it is explicitly articulated, there is a specific theological content being lived out here.

Second, “Christian practices . . . involve a profound awareness, a deep knowing: they are activities imbued with the knowledge of God and creation.”²⁶ Because the practice reflects both a knowledge of the human condition and God’s involvement in the world, which on some level is either implicitly assumed or theologically articulated, by participating in the practice we are drawn more deeply into a realization of both. We acquire a kind of knowledge, both about the participants and the God who is present in the practice, that can come only by entering into the experience itself. This experientially acquired knowledge confirms and complements even as it informs the content that is expressed and embodied in the experience.

Third, “Christian practices are social and historical . . . activities people engage in together over time.”²⁷ But the uniqueness and richness of the Christian understanding of the nature of this community, as the kingdom of God, the body of Christ, the church universal, etc., in which believers are linked together across time and location under the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, gives this aspect of the practices a distinctive quality

²⁵Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 22.

²⁶Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 24.

²⁷Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 26.

that cannot be fully experienced apart from the content.

Fourth, “Christian practices share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace.”²⁸ In spite of variations in how this is understood and articulated in various quarters of the Christian community, Christian practices embody a recognition that there are things that on profound levels have both gone very wrong and very right in our world, and draw us into a rich and meaningful way of life that helps us deal with both of those realities from the standpoint of grace, which in turn shape the way we respond to God and each other.²⁹ There is specific theological content that gives depth and meaning to what is practiced.

Interaction of Content and Practice

As we return once again to the nature of the interaction between content and practice, an important issue surfaces: how the theological content makes its way into a practice, establishes itself, or is discovered there. This is the issue to which Kathryn Tanner, in her contribution to Volf and Bass’ collection of essays, addresses herself. Even while allowing for her evident pessimism in her assessment of the contribution of careful academic theological reflection,³⁰ the contribution she makes to the discussion of

²⁸Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 27.

²⁹Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 28.

³⁰Tanner suggests that we should not take theologians too seriously when it comes to their descriptions of Christian practices. “To see Christian practices for what they are, one must not (ironically) be misled by the way theologians commonly portray Christian commitments; one must not read into the ordinary functioning of Christian practices what theologians say about them. Theologians, especially academically trained ones, are adept at making fully explicit and developing the sense of Christian commitments . . . While theological reflection can make helpful contributions to Christian practice when difficulties develop, the characteristics that such reflection strives for and prizes in its own constructions are rarely found displayed in everyday Christian life.” Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian

the practices is both important and helpful as she locates theological reflection not as a precursor for, or a superfluous add-on to the practices, but as something that is best done in the midst of them, and that arises out of “the ordinary workings of Christian lives to meet pressing practical needs.”³¹ Arguing that the practices themselves require little more than general theological themes to sustain them, and a kind of loose ambiguity in their details in order to stay flexible enough to adapt to various contexts and situations,³² what she sees as most significant are the questions that arise in the midst of participating in the practices that stimulate the need for theological reflection.³³

She illustrates this by referring to the practice of welcoming people to church, which certainly is an example of something that can be done without those participating fully realizing the depth of the theological implications of what they are doing. When in the midst of welcoming people to church the question arises as to whether certain kinds of people, gay couples, the homeless, the mentally ill, or those who are in some way radically different from the congregation, should also be welcomed, this provides the occasion in which theological reflection can take place. In the context of this illustration, Tanner raises these questions:

Is the practice of welcome primarily a means to increase church membership and therefore a way of sustaining the church in troubled times? If so, it would make little sense to welcome into church the very

Practices,” 229.

³¹Tanner states it like this: “Theological reflection does not merely come to Christian practices from the outside – either before the fact, as a means of educating people into Christian practices, or after the fact, as an external aid and supplement at best or an irrelevant distraction at worst, to practices that might run well without it. Theological reflection instead arises within the ordinary workings of Christian lives to meet pressing practical needs.” Tanner, 228.

³²Tanner, 231.

³³Tanner, 235.

people . . . who would prompt current members to leave. The same outcome would not be especially problematic where the practice of welcome is thought to be a part of the church's mission to reflect Jesus' own concern for the outsider even at severest cost to himself.³⁴

While one could argue that not all theological reflection that results in meaningful participation in a Christian way of living necessarily has to proceed out of actual situations, and that in many cases a clear understanding of the church and its role in the world which has in some respects already been worked out by others could provide sufficient guidance in what to do, she does provide an excellent description of how participation in a practice can lead to the kind of theological reflection that clarifies who we are, who God is, and how we can cooperate with God in His work in the world. She also makes connections with the fourth element suggested by Bass and Dykstra above by reminding us that in actual practice, while we may insist on a distinctiveness about Christianity as a redeemed way of life, the actual form the practices take can be somewhat messy. To insist otherwise, she argues, is to not take seriously enough the fallibility of people.³⁵ Additionally, she suggests that for us to grasp the full meaning of Christian practices, not only does their meaning need to be worked out in the relationship between the practices in society in general, but also their uniqueness needs to be viewed in contrast to non-Christian forms of practice in order to best be seen and understood.³⁶

Coming at this topic from a slightly different direction, Margaret Miles offers some helpful insights from her study of the devotional manuals of the Christian tradition in an attempt to gather information about how the practices embedded Christian ideals

³⁴Tanner, 236.

³⁵Tanner, 231.

³⁶Tanner, 242.

and values into a Christian way of life. Because the devotional manuals were aimed as much at the common worshiper as the trained theologian, they are particularly helpful in shedding light on how the Christian life was shaped for people in general, not just the theologian or monk. One of the key assumptions upon which these devotional manuals were built was the assumption that “altering habits . . . can change perceptions and ideas; insight is at least as likely to follow change as change is to follow insight.”³⁷ She goes on to argue that one of the difficulties we sometimes have in fully understanding the practices comes from a more contemporary stance of giving priority to insight over action. “In contrast to twentieth-century consensus, most historical people thought it obvious that insight follows change, changed behavior – changed activities – produce insight.”³⁸ In this respect, “Practices both prepare the conditions under which religious experiences are likely to occur and, subsequent to such experiences, provide a lifestyle that integrates and perpetuates them.”³⁹

Miles also points out, in ways that complement Tanner’s argument, that we need to hold the actual form the practices take somewhat loosely, that as we engage in practices as a part of the historical Christian community, we need to be sensitive to changes in culture and world view so that ancient practices are engaged in such a way as they do not wind up embedding values and lifestyle patterns that are at odds with the work God is doing in the world.

I do not advocate . . . a historicism that reduces all meaning to the conditions under which it arose. It is, however, possible both to

³⁷Miles, Practicing Christianity, 2.

³⁸Miles, 90.

³⁹Miles, 91.

understand the text as part of a complex historical situation which has shaped the style and content of the writing and to find that some of the insights formulated under this historical pressure are relevant and useful for me in my historical situation, while some are not.⁴⁰

In short, Miles' contribution reminds us that our efforts to connect with the practices of the historic community of faith need to be sensitive to an on-going process of reflection on how those practices interface with our contemporary world in such a way that God's work in the world is not hindered.

While there is significant consensus⁴¹ on many of the elements of the practices that are shared by those whose works I have referenced, it is Miroslav Volf who is most helpful in articulating this interplay between belief and practice, reminding us that "at the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life, and that theology is therefore best done from within the pursuit of this way of life."⁴² To put it one way, there are both core beliefs that Christian communities must hold true in order to maintain their identity, and practices which are the cooperative and meaningful human endeavors that seek to satisfy fundamental human needs . . . that people do together over time.⁴³ The practices, therefore, are "belief-shaped" with an "as-so" structure.⁴⁴ As God has been gracious to

⁴⁰Miles, 9.

⁴¹Dorothy Bass, in the introduction to Practicing Theology, articulates several areas of consensus among the various authors contributing to the book. These are (1) practices resist the separation of thinking from acting and thus doctrine from life, (2) practices are social, belonging to groups of people across generations, (3) practices are rooted in the past but constantly adapting to changing circumstances, and (4) practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologians. See Volf and Bass, Practicing Theology, 6.

⁴²Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," 247.

⁴³Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," 247-48.

⁴⁴Volf, "Theology for a Way of Life," 250.

us, for example, so we are to be gracious to those around us. In this sense, a “practice is Christian only insofar as Christ serves as the model for its practitioners.”⁴⁵

To put it another way, not only are beliefs embedded in practices, practices are embedded in beliefs. “Espousing a belief puts pressure upon one to act accordingly . . . Put more generally, basic Christian beliefs as beliefs entail practical commitments . . . they don’t need to be added to beliefs; they inhere in the beliefs.”⁴⁶ In short, “Practices are essentially belief-shaped, and beliefs are essentially practice-shaping.”⁴⁷

Having said that, it is important to note that Volf goes on to say that it would, however, be a mistake to conclude that the Christian way of life can be reduced down to simply imitating God, because at the heart of Christian faith is grace.

The Christian faith is not primarily about human doing; the gospel is not reducible to the barebones formal injunction, “Look at Christ and imitate a wholesome way of life,” or “Understand God and act accordingly.” The Christian faith is not primarily about human doing but about human receiving. . . . More than just normatively guiding practices, Christian beliefs narrate the divine action by which human beings are constituted as agents of practices.⁴⁸

Volf sees the practices as ways in which we resonate with God’s gracious involvement in our lives.

How does this resonance take place? According to Volf, while it is possible to accept beliefs first and then decide to act accordingly, more often people come to believe because they have somehow already found themselves engaged in the practices, or

⁴⁵Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 250.

⁴⁶Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 253.

⁴⁷Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 254.

⁴⁸Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 254.

because they are attracted to them. “In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow— or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engagement in practices themselves.”⁴⁹ And yet, it is not the practices that ultimately ground what we believe, but what is believed that actually grounds the practices and give them their meaning. They supply places and contexts in which we become more aware of and engaged in what grounds them, which is God and God’s involvement in the world.

Volf puts it like this:

Theology is not just reflection about how communities of faith use language about God . . . God, not human talk about God, is the proper object of theology . . . we engage in practices for the sake of God; we don’t construe a picture of God so as to justify engagement in a particular set of practices . . . God matters for God’s own sake, not for the sake of a preferred way of life. Since we identify who God is through beliefs . . . adequate beliefs about God cannot be ultimately grounded in a way of life; a way of life must be grounded in adequate beliefs about God.⁵⁰

The practices provide the containers for both the way of life that expresses and shapes the content of what we believe, and the content itself that grounds the practices. For practices to be genuinely “Christian,” what we believe matters. The practices are the containers that both hold and give shape to the those beliefs as they express and shape the way of life that they (both the practices and the beliefs) represent, and where God who shows up in their midst is encountered.

⁴⁹Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 256.

⁵⁰Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life,” 260.

Spiritual Direction as an Example

Not only do practices hold and give shape to belief even as they are grounded in and shaped by the content of what is believed, but they also help shape and give direction to the lives of those who participate in them. In this respect, because it focuses so specifically on this particular aspect of what happens when engaging the practices, the practice of spiritual direction provides a particularly useful illustration of how this works. As I will discuss in more detail later, the practices resist being neatly categorized and contained, but rather overlap and bleed into each other in significant ways. This is clearly the case with spiritual direction, elements of which are present in all of the practices, just as all of the practices contribute in some way to the process of spiritual direction. For our purposes here, however, an examination of the process of spiritual direction as one of the practices of the faith, both illustrates and further elucidates the nature of the practices.⁵¹ While there is much that could be said about the formal processes of spiritual direction, the focus here will be upon those elements that illustrate how as a practice of faith it sheds light upon the process internal to the other practices as well.

Joseph Allen in his book Inner Way: Toward a Rebirth of Eastern Christian Spiritual Direction, while himself most at home with those forms of spiritual direction which take the shape of a formal relationship between a director and a directee, points out that spiritual direction is much larger than that configuration. “The truth is that no matter what approach one takes with regard to the exact place and usage of the terms ‘spiritual direction,’ one can hardly disagree that, even if one cannot practice it as the precise

⁵¹Marjorie Thompson lists spiritual direction as one of the practices of the faith in her book Soul Feast (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

science and art of the ancient elder, one certainly can – and must – apply to the Church’s current task the rich heritage of the inner way.”⁵² That spiritual direction has indeed taken on many shapes and forms seems to be born out by the various images that have been used to try to capture this process. “. . . God’s usher, gardener, father, the Bridegroom’s friend, Moses, the ‘pilot that conducts our soul through the unknown ocean of the spiritual life,’ and physician.”⁵³ Some images shift the focus to the director as the one through which God works in a very direct way to influence the life of the directee. Others shift the focus more directly to what is happening between the directee and God, conceiving of the director as someone who facilitates that process, rather than channels it.⁵⁴ The first reflects a more sacramental mind set in which God’s direction and grace flow through the church (a structure) or church leaders to the recipient. The second seems to reflect (or at least is more compatible with) a mind set in which the community of believers is seen as the container into which God’s direction and grace are poured. Within that community would be those whose gifts would help facilitate that process. While these different perspectives reflect contrasting understandings on one level (which I do not mean to trivialize or minimize), at another level there are some significant points of agreement. Both perspectives recognize the importance of the spiritual journey being a shared one, with a sense of voluntary accountability to other fellow travelers. Both recognize the importance of an intentional process in which our stories are referenced to a

⁵²Joseph J. Allen, Inner Way: Toward a Rebirth of Eastern Christian Spiritual Direction (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 8.

⁵³Commentary to “Images and Models of the Spiritual Director,” Chap. 2 of Writings on Spiritual Direction, ed. Jerome M. Neufelder and Mary C. Coelho (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1982), 17.

⁵⁴Neufelder and Coelho, 17.

larger shared story that has as its ultimate goal drawing us into communion with God. And, both can be deepened and enriched by listening to what is contributed by the other. The experience and mentoring of the “elders” who have gone before and the unique experience of the individual seeker both need to be honored.

A helpful more contemporary metaphor suggested by Andrew Dreitcer is that of the spiritual friend.⁵⁵ This image has solid biblical roots, and has repeatedly surfaced throughout the history of the practice of spiritual direction, particularly in the Celtic church.⁵⁶ Not only does this image correct for abuses that can arise in more parental and/or hierarchical configurations, but it more accurately “describes ‘the inner relationship’ at the heart of the communion between God and humankind and between persons.”⁵⁷ In this approach “spiritual directors set aside their own agendas concerning their directees’ lives, and instead seek to help these spiritual friends uncover their own unique ways with God.”⁵⁸ This image of spiritual friend will be the primary image I will work from in suggesting ways in which spiritual direction illustrates the dynamics inherent in the practices.

Implicit in these kinds of shared relationships is the centrality of the relational context in which they occur. While spirituality includes times of disengagement and solitude, living the spiritual life well is not something we can do in isolation. We need each other. Community is not optional. Spiritual direction emphasizes and affirms that it

⁵⁵Andrew Dreitcer, “New Testament Images for Spiritual Direction,” The Way Supplement 91 (1998): 56.

⁵⁶Dreitcer, 56-57.

⁵⁷Dreitcer, 58.

⁵⁸Dreitcer, 59.

is in a relational context as a part of a community that this, as well as the other practices, occur.

Individual Human Experience in Community

One of the ways that spiritual direction unfolds the implications of what is inherent in the practices can be seen is in the way that spiritual direction takes human experience seriously. Discussing the presuppositions behind the practice of spiritual direction, Allen, quoting Dermont Lane, points out, “God comes to man in experience. We receive God in experience. We do not project, create, or posit God in experience. Rather we find God already there ahead of us, in human experience.”⁵⁹ However, as Allen goes on to say, “experience does not stand alone. It requires the spiritual director’s theological interpretation . . . a director helps his directee interpret his or her own experience against the ‘Christian fact,’ God finds a means of speaking, and the experience, whatever its nature, becomes a ‘religious’ experience.”⁶⁰

This illustrates well the process that takes place when we engage in spiritual practices. By participating in the practices of the faith, and allowing our experience to be shaped by our participation and to be viewed through the lenses the practices provide, God finds a means of speaking. In this respect, one could argue that in one sense participation in Christian practices becomes a form of spiritual direction, even as spiritual direction is one of the practices of faith, particularly when this is done alongside of others who reflect on these experiences with us, and to whom we are mutually accountable.

⁵⁹Dermot Lane, The Experience of God (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 3, cited in Allen, Inner Way, 69.

⁶⁰Allen, 70.

Here again, because of the way that the concerns of spiritual direction are woven into the practices, understanding what constitutes good spiritual direction as a practice of the faith, may also be very helpful in shedding light on the manner in which we engage in reflect on the practices of faith as a whole.

One of the ways in which this convergence can be detected are in those times of crisis when, to use Allen's imagery, a spiritual director helps us overturn the compost pile of what we are having to deal with in order to expose the soil out of which new things can grow.⁶¹ Engaging in practices that help us address forgiveness, healing, or perhaps even dying in the context of a relationship with a spiritual friend, friends, or the larger community, can be important ways in which we hear God speaking to us in the midst of crisis. Understanding how a spiritual friend can effectively be alongside of someone going through a crisis might greatly impact the way a practice is engaged.

Sensitivity to a style of direction that "honors the experience of the seeker, welcomes the directee in love and strives to establish a sacred environment of safety and trust in which the directee can freely explore how God is in his or her life . . . [and in which] directors set aside their own agendas concerning their directee's lives, and instead seek to help these spiritual friends uncover their own unique ways with God"⁶² would have a profound impact on the way in which people are supported, instructed, and led to engage in the practices of the faith. This allows for the unique voice of the individual to be preserved even as it is heard against the backdrop of the community's own voice and the larger story that helps bring meaning to their own individual story.

⁶¹Allen, 62-64.

⁶²Dreitcer, 59.

Preservation of Unique Voices

It is the sensitivity to preserve the uniqueness of this individual voice that is reflected in Kathleen Fischer's work as she reminds us that "attentiveness to a person's experience is, of course, central to any spiritual direction context."⁶³ While spiritual practices may take on certain forms or processes that give them structure and shape, what Fischer wants us to see is that the starting point is not so much a particular process or the particular shape spiritual direction (or for our purposes here, the practices) takes, but the experience of the individual that engages them. It is with the person, the content of their experience and the conceptual framework with which they understand their experience that one begins. Or to paraphrase the words of Jesus in Mark 2:27 (who is addressing the practice of Sabbath-keeping), "The practices were made for people, not people for the practices." This means being sensitive to what it means for persons, all of whom have a specific gender, age, ethnicity, economic status, world view, etc., to participate. In a similar vein, Thomas Hart reminds us that we find God's direction in our lives "deep within, where the Spirit dwells, bearing witness with our spirit (Rm 8:16). When we come in touch with our own deepest orientation and desire, our own real interior elan, we have also found God's direction for our lives."⁶⁴ The essential insight here that bears directly on the practices is that they need to be entered into in such a way that these deep places where God is at work within us are recognized and engaged.

Children. This interior landscape over which the Spirit moves and within which the Spirit dwells, however, is not uniform in terrain. One of the places that the difference

⁶³Kathleen Fischer, Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 6.

⁶⁴Thomas N. Hart, The Art of Christian Listening (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 75.

in terrain becomes evident is in the spiritual experience of children. Addressing the unique needs of children, Jean Stairs observes:

We have been more concerned with providing instruction in the faith than with listening to children's souls and hearing and valuing what is important to them. Generally, we have allowed our concern for children to be wholly expressed in preventative and instructional ways. . . If young children are not affirmed in their real bond between themselves and God, and if they lack opportunities to bond with God and respond to that authentic encounter, then the older child's behavior and response may well reflect the lack of such loving reality.⁶⁵

She goes on to suggest three ways that the ability of children to listen responsively to God can be nurtured. These are the use of rituals which use scripture and signs in ways that children can grasp, the use of tangible objects that nurture a sense of wonder, and prayer in the form of praise, recollection and silence.⁶⁶ While all of these elements surface in various spiritual practices, if children are to be able to engage them, they need to be configured in such a way that children are able to respond from the interior place where God's Spirit is working within them. Otherwise they simply become learned behaviors that, instead of facilitating God's interior work, may actually get in the way of it. In this case, in order for the practices to be accessible to children, they need to be configured in a way congruent with how children experience God.

Gender. Another significant variation in the terrain over which the Spirit moves is influenced by gender. Margaret Guenther, quoting Martin Smith, shares this insight:

The historical monopoly men have had of the official teaching roles in the church, a monopoly now happily on the way to being broken, has meant, among other things, that women have usually been required to understand

⁶⁵Jean Stairs, Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 158.

⁶⁶Stairs, 171-72.

their relationship with God and their ethical and spiritual responses in terms that do not fit the special dynamics of women's lives.⁶⁷

In this instance the problem that arises is two-fold. First, as is explored in some detail in the works of Fischer and Guenther, women are hampered by not having images that they can, from their own experience as a women, relate to directly. Second, when feminine images and ways of relating are minimized, men miss out on insights and perspectives that would balance and further enrich their understanding of God and their relationship with God. In fact, this is one of the problems that feminist spirituality seeks to address. "Feminist spirituality seeks to replace this dichotomy [individualism vrs. relatedness] with a vision of mutuality in which individuality and relatedness are compatible and necessary aspects of all reality, supporting and enhancing one another."⁶⁸ Because the practices, like more traditional forms of spiritual direction, are often configured from a male perspective, it is important that care is given to making sure that the practices are facilitated in such a way that women are able to participate fully, both in what they receive and in what they contribute.

Metaphors of Practice

Play. One of the ways that both Guenther and Stairs suggest that this kind of mutual enriching could be made more evident is by learning to view the spiritual life in general, and the practices in particular, less in terms of things we work hard at, and more

⁶⁷Margaret Guenther, Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992), 121, quoting Martin Smith, Reconciliation (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1985), 77.

⁶⁸Guenther, 40.

in terms of play.⁶⁹ While play can be quite intense and focused, more than that, genuine play is also freeing and liberating⁷⁰ – a notion that can too easily get lost in the midst of more compulsive product-oriented perspectives. This is one reason why Stairs argues that the word *practices* is a more appropriate word than *disciplines* in describing the things we engage in to support and enrich our response to God’s work in our lives.⁷¹ She goes on to suggest that “some words of caution are in order . . . Spiritual practices can become a new form of legalism . . . We need to be careful not to make any spiritual practice into a new legalism or burden.”⁷²

Midwife. An additional intriguing suggestion made by Guenther to add to the more traditional images that seek to capture the role of spiritual director, is that of “midwife.” The midwife is a person who is “present to another in a time of vulnerability.”⁷³ She is “a teacher in the best sense of the word in that she helps the birthgiver towards greater self knowledge.” She assists in a natural event, as opposed to treating a disease. She sees clearly what the birthgiver may actually know, but in the midst of the pain and stress of the situation may have a difficult time keeping in focus.⁷⁴ “The midwife knows how and when to confront,” and, she enters into the joy and celebration of the new life that emerges.⁷⁵

⁶⁹Guenther, 58; Stairs, 110.

⁷⁰Guenther, 59.

⁷¹Stairs, 110-11.

⁷²Stairs, 111-12.

⁷³Guenther, 87.

⁷⁴Guenther, 87.

⁷⁵Guenther, 88.

All of these descriptions nicely parallel the movements inherent in the practices of faith. Spiritual practices are frequently engaged at times of vulnerability, lead us to fuller self-knowledge, are less about treating pathology and more about enhancing emerging new life, provide ways to see more clearly when our vision may be limited, have confrontational qualities at times, and seek to facilitate celebration of God's movements in our lives. The image of midwife may be one example of an image that not only engages the experience of women, but enhances the picture of both direction and participation in the practices for women and men alike.

Other issues which help to shape the interior terrain over which the Spirit moves in our lives also are well worth considering. Ethnic or religious heritage, socio-economic standing, education, previous experiences in our families of origin, and political and cultural influences, are some of the other forces that shape the interior landscape.⁷⁶

Centrality of God

Taking human experience seriously, however, should not obscure the fact that the primary focus of the spiritual practices is not us but God. Spiritual practices are the way in which we seek to express, and indeed to seek after, something that is much larger than ourselves, but they are not ends in themselves. Gerald May in Care of Mind, Care of

⁷⁶ Although she is speaking primarily out of the context of a discussion of feminism, Kathleen Fischer articulates a principle which extends to other contexts as well as we consider how to make the practices fully accessible to everyone. "Whatever promotes the full humanity of women as well as men is redemptive and holy, that is, it is of God. What denies and distorts that full humanity does not bear the power and authority of divine revelation. A word that calls every person -- all genders, social groups, and races -- to full dignity and happiness, this is indeed a word of life to guide our decision-making and commitments." Fischer, 128.

Spirit and Tilden Edwards in Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion,⁷⁷ though writing from very different vantage points (that of a psychiatrist and that of an Episcopal priest, respectively), both remind us that in spiritual direction (and by extension, the practices) the goal is not to bring God into the life of the individual worshiper so much as to bring the individual worshiper into the life of God. God is not a means to an end, God is the end. In this respect is it less about helping people discover how to connect with God so that God can solve their problems, as it is about finding those points of grace where God is at work in the midst of what is happening in their lives.

Craig Dykstra articulates a similar perspective in his description of how we engage in spiritual practices. Seeing the faith with which we approach these practices less as something that grows *within us* as something that *grows us*, he notes that “after a time, the primary point about the practices is no longer that they are something we do. Instead, they become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do. . . .”⁷⁸ Spiritual practices seek to provide, not so much a set of tools that help access resources that we can use to bring about spiritual growth, as means by which we can place ourselves in the context where we can be accessed by something (Someone) much larger than ourselves that we cannot fully grasp. In this respect, both spiritual direction in particular and the practices as a whole are less like tools and more like portals which we pass through to more fully enter into an awareness of the presence of God, not because we open the portals by what we do,

⁷⁷Gerald May, Care of Mind, Care of Spirit (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); and Tilden Edwards, Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

⁷⁸Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 56.

but because God opens them at God's own prior initiative and invites us through.

Ironically, this may be one of the areas where things are most likely to go awry. Despite the theological disclaimers to the contrary, in actual practice, church life and ministry too easily get caught in the gravitational pull of the desire to produce and control a particular "product" instead of simply facilitating a way in which people can enter more fully into an awareness of God's presence in their lives. In the midst of this realization, whether one provides formal spiritual direction or helps facilitate participation in the practices, it is vitally important that we are careful to not allow the process to become subverted. Spiritual direction and the practices may facilitate and help shape our responses, but the goal is entering into God's presence, where the real work is done by God. This is important because, as Edwards points out,

[the] practices themselves . . . are largely neutral. They can be used to escape or to embrace life in God. It is not difficult to evade God in the name of God, as Jesus showed us in talking about empty ritual display in spiritual practice. . . the kind of conscious and unconscious desire that we bring to our practice . . . can go a long way in shaping our willingness to appreciate the Presence ever vibrant in our midst.⁷⁹

The two major concerns he raises in regard to the practices are: (1) the tendency to think that spiritual growth is something we orchestrate, using the practices as tools to secure our place in the kingdom of God,⁸⁰ or (2) Our desire to use the practices as a way to get God to bless the development of our own kingdoms rather than allow God to change us into conformity to God's kingdom.⁸¹ These are somewhat different than the stance of being open to the work of God's Spirit blowing as unpredictably and surprisingly as the

⁷⁹Edwards, 78.

⁸⁰Edwards, 76.

⁸¹Edwards, 77.

wind through our lives in ways we cannot fully anticipate or control, but need to live responsively towards.

However, for all the possible pitfalls, when focused properly, these practices of the faith can be the very channels through which the Spirit of God can blow.

Commenting on the role of liturgy, Edwards notes,

The physical exchange of peace or handshake encourages reconciliation. The words of liturgy help to interpret and guide our experience. The dialectic revealed between God and persons in the words of liturgy and in the sermon teach listening and response to callings. The collection expresses a shared community of goods. Praising teaches us praise.⁸²

While the practices cannot capture or contain the wind any more than a sail on a boat can, with a little care and trimming, a sail can be set to catch the wind, and provide the boat the power it needs for the journey. While many maneuvers are possible, the art of spiritual direction and the practices are to allow the wind not only to propel the craft, but to set the course as well. Both Edwards and May emphasize the importance of using whatever skill we have to work with the wind and not against it, never losing sight of the reality that the wind is much greater than we are, and that we serve it, it does not serve us.

A second perspective that both Edwards and May provide that is helpful in understanding the way God may be encountered relates to the way that fascination with “spiritual experiences” can actually get in the way of seeking God or being aware of God’s presence. While the wind of the Spirit may blow with gale force or surprisingly stimulating sensation at times, it may just as well, and perhaps most often, be present as a gentle breeze, or a barely detectable movement in the stillness. Seeking to be in God’s

⁸²Edwards, 159.

presence is not the same as seeking a spiritual experience of being in God's presence.

May comments:

A helpful rule of thumb here is whenever a spiritual experience or the search for spiritual experiences becomes the overriding focus of attention, things have gone astray. Although spiritual journeys often begin in the context of experience, and although experiences constitute major vehicles of insight, growth, support, and service along the way, the goal of the journey can never legitimately be experience itself. The goal is beyond experience, and has to do with our actually becoming who God means us to be and doing what God means us to do. Experiences can sometimes be helpful means toward this end, and they can sometimes get in the way. But they are never the end in themselves.⁸³

As fascination with religious experiences continues to grow in our world today, it is critically important that we facilitate practices that make space for God in our lives so that God can show up as God chooses, rather than try to create settings in which God is expected to show up in certain ways. As valid as stimulating religious experiences may be, avoiding the temptation to elicit and market spiritual experiences to hungry consumers may turn out to be one of the significant challenges facing the church that seeks to provide genuine nourishment to people who are becoming more aware of their hunger for God.

In addition to specific insights that can be gleaned from the practice of spiritual direction, in a more general sense, the relationship between spiritual direction and the practices of the faith can be viewed in terms of a layered or expanding spiral. On the most basic level, spiritual direction occurs as one is a part of a faith sharing community in which the members are mutually supportive and hold each other accountable to the larger story that defines the way of life they are living together. On a deeper level, spiritual

⁸³May, 46.

direction occurs through engagement in the practices of the faith which express and surface the ways that God is at work and through which they can become more aware of the presence of the Spirit. On a yet deeper level, one could engage in a relationship with a director or spiritual friend who is gifted in the areas of attentiveness and discernment, and who helps us reflect on our experience in more focused ways by which we become even more aware of God's movements in our lives. In this way, the practice of spiritual direction serves as a powerful illustration of one way the practices serve as a container which holds the life of faith, and illustrates the dynamics at work within the practices, even as it overlaps and intermixes with the containers that represent other practices as well, and which would illustrate this process in their own ways as well. That which applies to good spiritual direction also informs the way we enter into the practices and interact with each other as a part of the faith community. In another sense, the practices themselves help shape the context in which spiritual direction takes place. As directors and directees appropriately engage in the practices of the faith, their relationship with God is deepened and enhanced, and the story against which life experiences are interpreted comes into focus a little better. While there are people within the faith community uniquely gifted in the areas of attentiveness and discernment who might do formal spiritual direction, in another sense, in principle, spiritual direction is a function of the entire worshiping community. This illustrates how allowing the insights of spiritual direction to inform and shape the way we engage the practices of our faith deepens the level of the experience.

Identifying the Practices

Having suggested an understanding of what practices are and explored some of the dynamics of their inner-workings, the question of what forms or expressions the practices take as they surface in the life of the believer arises. What are these not “too big” or “too small” constitutive elements that Bass and Dykstra refer to that provide distinct and yet overlapping units of wholeness as they mesh together to form a distinctive way of life?⁸⁴ What shape do these significant moments and movements of spiritual direction take? While much could undoubtedly be gained by a thorough historical survey of the way that practices have developed throughout the history of Israel and the Christian Church, this project will focus primarily on current ways that the practices are identified and understood in the wake of the insights that have been surfaced and shared by Dykstra, Bass, and their colleagues.

Acknowledging that it is unlikely that there will ever be complete agreement on all aspects of any list of practices that attempt to define Christian faith, and suggesting that this actually allows them to be engaged in ways that are appropriate to the needs and situations of unique communities,⁸⁵ Dykstra offers a suggestion of what such a list might look like in the context of his own faith community, the United Presbyterian Church.⁸⁶ Dorothy Bass, drawing from authors representing different Christian faith communities also suggests lists of practices that are somewhat definitive of the Christian life in the

⁸⁴Dykstra and Bass, “Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 18.

⁸⁵Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice,” 48.

⁸⁶Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 42.

book she both edited and to which she contributed, Practicing Our Faith. Way To Live, co-edited by Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, reflects similar flexibility in configuring practices in a way designed to be meaningful to high school age young people.⁸⁷ This is

Dykstra	Bass	Bass & Richter	Dean & Foster
<u>Growing in the Life of Faith</u>	<u>Practicing our Faith</u>	<u>Way To Live</u>	<u>The God Bearing Life</u>
1. Worshiping God Together 2. Telling the Christian Story together (Scripture & History) 3. Interpreting together the story for today 4. Praying together and alone 5. Confessing, forgiving and reconciling with one another 6. Tolerating and encouraging each other in what we are called to do 7. Faithful acts of service and witness done together 8. Giving generously and receiving graciously 9. Suffering with and for others 10. Providing hospitality and care to all, strangers and enemies included 11. Listening and talking attentively to one another - telling our own stories 12. Struggling to be conscious of and to understand the context we live in 13. Criticising and resisting powers and patterns that destroy people, community and creation 14. Working together to create and maintain social structures that sustain life in ways according to God's will.	1. Honoring the body 2. Hospitality 3. Household Economics 4. Saying Yes and saying No 5. Keeping Sabbath 6. Testimony 7. Discernment 8. Shaping Communities 9. Forgiveness 10. Healing 11. Dying Well 12. Singing our lives.	1. Life 2. The Story 3. Bodies 4. Stuff 5. Food 6. Creation 7. Creativity 8. Work 9. Play 10. Time 11. Truth 12. Choices 13. Friends 14. Welcome 15. Forgiveness 16. Justice 17. Grieving 18. Music 19. Prayer 20. Practice	1. Baptism 2. Eucharist 3. Almsgiving 4. Catechesis 5. Chastity 6. Christian Conference 7. Marriage 8. Confession 9. Confirmation 10. Contemplation 11. Covenanting 12. Discernment 13. Dying Well 14. Fasting 15. Forgiveness 16. Healing 17. Hospitality 18. Intercession 19. Justice 20. Sabbath 21. Ordination 22. Praise 23. Preaching 24. Reconciliation 25. Speaking Truth in Love 26. Spiritual Resistance 27. Stillness 28. Stewardship 29. Testimony 30. Thanksgiving etc.

Figure 3.1 Comparison of Configurations of Lists of Practices

⁸⁷Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds., Way To Live (Nashville: UpperRoom Books, 2002).

illustrated again in selections from Dean and Foster's The Godbearing Life,⁸⁸ which also focuses in the area of Youth Ministry and suggests a list that includes many of Bass and Richter's suggestions while adding some additional ones as well. Perhaps more helpful than Dean and Foster's longer list is their suggestion for categories or "families" that practices can be organized into. They suggest the classifications of Communion, Compassion, Teaching and Nurture, Witness, Dehabituating, and Worship.⁸⁹ While no particular configuration claims to be exhaustive or even expressive of the practices that are most important, all attempt to articulate practices that are significant parts of the Christian way of life. As Figure 3.1 illustrates, while each list is distinct in reflecting the unique perspectives of their authors, there is also, as one might expect, a significant amount of overlap.

In addition to those mentioned above who have largely developed their lists of practices in the wake of the contributions of MacIntyre and Dykstra, other voices in the late twentieth century have emerged, suggesting similar lists of life patterns that are, if not definitive of, at least supportive of a Christian way of life. Seeking to draw largely from historic exercises or patterns of spiritual life, these are most often referred to as spiritual disciplines. Well known among these are Richard Foster, who published his Celebration of Discipline in 1978 and Dallas Willard who published The Spirit of the Disciplines in 1988 (Figure 3.2).⁹⁰ Foster describes three categories of disciplines: inward, outward,

⁸⁸Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, The Godbearing Life (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 107.

⁸⁹Dean and Foster, 111.

⁹⁰Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); Dallas Willard, The Spirit of the Disciplines (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

and corporate. Willard divides his set of disciplines into those of abstinence and those of engagement. Eugene Peterson suggests two categories, those that are basic to the

Foster	Willard	Peterson
<u>Inward Disciplines</u> - Meditation - Prayer - Fasting - Study	<u>Disciplines of Abstinence</u> - Solitude - Silence - Fasting - Frugality - Chastity - Secrecy - Sacrifice - Watchings	<u>The Rule</u> - Weekly Common Worship - Daily Praying the Psalms - Recollected Prayer
<u>Outward Disciplines</u> - Simplicity - Solitude - Submission - Service <u>Corporate Disciplines</u> - Confession - Worship - Guidance - Celebration	<u>Disciplines of Engagement</u> - Study - Worship - Celebration - Service - Prayer - Fellowship - Confession - Submission	<u>Disciplines when needed</u> - Spiritual Reading - Spiritual Direction - Meditation - Confession - Bodily exercise - Fasting - Sabbath-keeping - Dream interpretation - Retreats - Pilgrimage - Almsgiving - Journaling - Sabbaticals - Small Groups

Figure 3.2 Comparison of Lists of Spiritual Disciplines

Christian life, and those that are to be engaged as needed.⁹¹ Here, too, these lists are seen to be suggestive and not exhaustive, and also have significant areas of overlap as well as unique areas of contribution among them. Furthermore, while some of the disciplines listed may be very similar to practices listed above, others may be spiritual exercises that might be engaged as a part of a larger more expansive spiritual practice. The disciplines of solitude or silence, for example, might be part of engaging the practice of worship,

⁹¹Paul Jensen, "The Collapse of Space and Time and the Spirituality of The Postmodern Generations" (Ph.D. tutorial, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2002), 97-99.

Sabbath-keeping or discernment. In general, spiritual practices tend to describe larger life patterns, while spiritual disciplines or spiritual exercises focus more specifically on particular ways those patterns might be expressed. This project will focus primarily on spiritual practices, although spiritual disciplines will be seen as part of the pool of resources that will be drawn from in order to engage those practices more fully.

CHAPTER 4

PRACTICES IN A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CONTEXT

Having noted in the preceding chapters many of the supporting pillars upholding the canopy of practices which spread over and enfold Christian life, and how the fabric that makes up this canopy is enriched through theological reflection, understood in the context of spiritual direction, and made more explicit and accessible to those who would gather beneath it, attention will now be given to what such a canopy would look like in the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Acknowledging that Seventh-day Adventists, even with their distinctive areas of emphasis, are located solidly within the flow of Protestant Christianity (often reflecting many of the forms and concerns of the evangelical community), those elements of Adventist faith that give it its unique identity make the question of what the essential practices are that would constitute such a canopy for Adventists a pertinent one.¹ This is especially the case when it comes to preparing people for membership in the church. Further, given the tendency noted earlier for Adventists to define themselves largely in terms of doctrinal statements, how Adventists would accurately and adequately define themselves in terms of spiritual practices, and what dynamics within the church community would need to be addressed that might either foster or hinder such a perspective, also needs to be considered.

¹While frequent reference will be made to various aspects of Adventist doctrinal belief, it is beyond the scope and purposes of this project to deal extensively with the development of doctrine and theology in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is assumed for the purposes of our discussion here that, even with distinctive areas of special or unique emphasis that will be noted, Adventists fall well within the mainstream of orthodoxy for conservative protestant Christianity. Practices that would be considered as central to the Christian faith in general would also be held to be so by Adventists.

The Organic Quality of the Practices

Having gone to some length to describe significant aspects of the architecture of the canopy of the practices and the pillars that support it, it is also important to keep in mind the essentially organic nature of this endeavor. Whether discussing the content of what is believed, or the lifestyle patterns that both arise from the content and from which the content in turn is shaped and arises again, it is neither the ability to accurately articulate mental constructions or faithfully reproduce patterned behaviors that is at the heart of spiritual life. What the descriptions refer to, and what the patterned behaviors both describe and support, is a way of life that is itself alive. If much of the previous discussion of the practices might in some ways resemble a theoretical or theological structure of some kind, it is a structure that is designed to support something that is alive and growing, thus in its implementation the metaphor shifts from something resembling that of a builder to something closer to that of a gardener. While, as Marjorie Thompson points out in her discussion of the significance of developing a rule of life as a means for nurturing the ongoing process of spiritual formation, without the support of stakes, trellises, or similar structures, many healthy and growing things would be reduced to little more than piles of vegetation and would fail to flourish or yield much beauty.² It is important in discussing pillars, canopies, and trellises that we not lose sight of the wonder of the living things that grow on them and in the midst of them.

While good gardening does require careful planning and hard work, when the opportunity comes to see, or perhaps even to taste the fruit of our labors, we will have

²Thompson, Soul Feast, 137.

missed something profoundly significant if we are not awed by the realization that however much effort we expend, there is something, or Someone, much greater at work in all of this. Gardening involves planning, planting, and ensuring adequate water, nutrients, sun, or shade – the things that are necessary to support life and growth. Yet, almost ironically, the most beautiful scenes in nature and the richest sources of nourishment for living things are often supplied without our effort or aid. In those cases our most pressing task may be to enjoy them without spoiling them. Still, we are given the privilege of planting, watering, nurturing, supporting, and celebrating growth.³ This calls for an approach that is characterized by awareness.

While there are a lot of factors that influence growth that lie well beyond our control (weather conditions and the mystery of life itself), what we do is not insignificant. In fact, it can mean the difference between beauty and deformity, or in some cases, even life and death. Gardening involves the effort to recognize and perhaps help create conditions in which growing things can flourish, as well as seeking to shield them from conditions that would hinder growth. It involves sensitivity to what the seeds we plant and tend have been designed to be, and allowing them to develop accordingly. It involves wisdom in trimming and the use of trellises, so that in shaping, supporting, and expressing our own creativity, we are also careful to support the unique identity and expression of the life that the seed contains, and thus honor the Creator. It involves mindfulness of how this new emerging life will impact and be impacted by the other

³Richard Foster uses a similar language in his description of Spiritual Disciplines: “A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the spiritual disciplines . . . they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they only get us to the place where something can be done.” Foster, 7.

living things that will surround it. And it involves the exercise of caution and self-insight on the part of the gardener. Because gardeners, for better or for worse, bring their own backgrounds, assumptions and biases to the task, gardening can be fraught with its own set of hazards and pitfalls.

In spite of the limitations inherent in metaphors,⁴ gardening is not a bad one for describing what is at the heart of the practices, and the work of preparing people for membership in the church. Though it brings to mind various kinds of activity and labor, it is an image that points beyond those things to something greater that gives meaning to those efforts.

Coming to faith means coming to recognize that the context of all our growing and living is the world in which, over which, and through which the Spirit of God known in Jesus Christ reigns. We may fail to recognize this; or, recognizing it, we may refuse to accept it. We manufacture worlds of our own, of which we are the center and source, and we strive to control, guide, direct, and force our own growing and journeying within them. In this and many other ways, we often struggle against the fact that we live at all only because we live in an environment constituted by the graciousness of a loving God. But such recognition and acceptance are what define faith and originate, undergird, and mobilize growth in faith and in the life of faith.⁵

It is the realization that in tending the practices of faith, we are not only standing on holy ground, but working holy soil in which something much bigger than we are is at work which we can neither harness nor control, and yet can facilitate or hinder, that gives us perspective. Without this we never see gardening or the spiritual life that emerges in the

⁴Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 35-36. Here he reminds us that we need to use metaphors like these cautiously, remembering that faith is something that we experience in response to God, not just as a natural developmental process; that progress through defined stages of faith is not necessarily assured; and that we need to be careful about how we define just what it is that we mean by faith maturity.

⁵Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 37-38.

midst of the practices for what they truly are.

One of the significant opportunities for gardening is found in the process of preparing people for membership in the church. Because for Seventh-day Adventists baptism is typically the way that decisions to join the church are celebrated, this process is often referred to as “baptismal preparation” which most often also involves participation in “baptismal classes.”⁶ These classes generally are conducted for young people in their Junior High and High School years.⁷ Typically, they consist of the study and/or review of basic Christian beliefs, the unique perspectives of the Adventist Church, and encouragement in the area of developing a personal relationship with God. The actual format and structure of these classes vary. Depending upon the materials used,⁸ the approach of the person leading the studies and the needs of the students, baptismal

⁶Seventh-day Adventists’ view of baptism reflects the tradition of the radical reformation, and is often referred to as “believer’s baptism.” In many ways it functions as somewhat of a spiritual rite of passage, based on an informed decision to respond to God’s invitation. It is at this point that people “officially,” by choice, become members of the church. There are baby dedication services in which parents dedicate their children to God, and throughout their growing up years children are fully considered to be part of the church community. However, as they grow older, they come to a place in their lives when they are aware that their decision to be a Christian and a member of the church is not simply a matter of how they have been raised, but also what they decide for themselves. This is similar, as I understand it, to the experience of “confirmation” that is practiced in certain other Christian communities. Children raised in the church usually are baptized in their Junior High or High School years. People who have not been raised in the Adventist church, and who have not already been baptized in another faith community with a similar view of baptism, are baptized when they join.

⁷For reasons that are (in the opinion of this author) somewhat pragmatic in nature (elementary school students tend to be more easily led to make “decisions for Jesus” than Junior High or High School students, who tend to ask more critical, probing questions about their faith in a much more challenging developmental context), sometimes baptismal classes are conducted with children in the late elementary school years. While young children should be encouraged to make commitments to Jesus in all of their years, the practice of encouraging young children to be baptized does stand somewhat in tension with the theology of baptism as understood by Adventists.

⁸There are currently three major sets of materials published by the Seventh-day Adventist Church for use in baptismal classes, representing a variety of formats and teaching approaches. These are: Steve Case, It’s My Choice (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996); Chris Blake, A Reason to Believe (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1993); and Troy Fitzgerald, ChristWise: Leader’s Guide for Juniors, Teens and Youth (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002).

classes might meet together for as few as ten or as many as thirty sessions. But even with this level of flexibility and recent innovations in the published materials, the approaches taken are quite consistent in using doctrinal themes as the primary framework for study. The implication would seem to be that what is most crucial for spiritual life in general, and for those contemplating baptism in particular, is a clear grasp of the information that describes their faith. From the organization of the material itself, one could conclude that its goal is communicating and instilling information (or in some cases a particular perspective on the information), rather than nurturing and instilling spiritual practices.

This is not to suggest that spiritual practices are unimportant to Adventists. Quite the contrary. Adventists emphasize the importance of a meaningful devotional life, and in living in a way that reflects the character of God in all the various aspects of their lives from principles of personal healthful living to a world-wide medical work; from local community service programs to the global ADRA (the Adventist Development and Relief Agency). In fact, some of the most recently published baptismal materials make some encouraging movements toward providing opportunities for students to engage some of the practices as a part of these studies.⁹ However, it would be fair to say that even the most current approaches still tend to be primarily concerned with conveying meaningful and accurate *content* with attempts to personalize and integrate it into one's life, rather than focusing on instilling meaningful *practices* which would provide the lenses through which the content of the faith could be viewed, understood and engaged. If one were to take their cues simply from the methodology used, it would seem as though *information*

⁹Fitzgerald's material in particular reflects important movement toward incorporating the concept of mentoring, prayer, and the importance of a shared community journey into the process of preparation.

has a definite edge over *transformation*, or perhaps that information is being relied upon as the primary vehicle for transformation.

The Importance of Content

Given Adventism's location in Christendom toward the more conservative end of the theological spectrum (even though some of its manifestations would be considered somewhat liberal by evangelical standards), the focus on the importance of content is quite understandable. This position is underscored even more by the fact that Adventists see themselves as "heirs of the reformation,"¹⁰ and as such derive much of their identity and reason for existence from the conviction that they have some unique doctrinal contributions to make. At the very heart of Adventist identity, it is not just the fact *that we believe*, or the *way we believe*, but also *what we believe* that matters. Thus, most Adventists would resonate strongly with Dykstra when he says,

Though God is known in and through history and is experienced inwardly and personally, the knowledge of God and God's promises can never be reduced simply to internal individual experience or to a by-product of historical social processes . . . This God is both the Truth who sets us free and the Source of all truth there is. Faith is oriented toward truth, and the knowledge of faith is the knowledge of Truth (John 8:31-38).¹¹

Thus, communicating specific content, particularly as it relates to the character of God as revealed in Jesus (the "truth as it is in Jesus" is a favorite Adventist phrase), including their unique doctrinal perspectives, is important for Adventists in preparing for baptism.

¹⁰This is the phrase, often used among Adventists, which reflects the idea that they see themselves continuing the work that the reformation began, seeking to continue to recover Biblical perspectives that had been lost sight of over the years.

¹¹Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 22.

The Limitations of Content as an Organizing Principle

It is here however, in the conveyance of this truth, at least potentially, that the gardening experience can become problematic. If the emphasis upon getting the content right becomes exaggerated or its own end, it can overtly or covertly wind up undermining the content itself. Sadly, the history of the Christian church is riddled with more than adequate examples of this to make people understandably leery of what can happen when a particular way of describing truth becomes more important than the actual truth it is trying to promote. One could certainly hope for an environment in which the formulations of what we believe, and perhaps the eagerness to share them, would not get in the way of the Reality they are trying to point to – where we could listen openly, attentively, and gracefully to each other, without the pressure to either give up what matters or force something upon someone else, but rather allow what is shared to challenge and/or enrich us. In my experience, however, keeping this in its proper focus often requires a significant amount of tending by the gardener.

Another way that using the systematic presentation of doctrine as the organizing motif for baptismal studies can fall short is alluded to by Eddie Gibbs.

[W]ithin most local churches, especially those in existence for thirty years or more, there will be groups of individuals who think with traditional, modern, and postmodern assumptions. Each group has a legitimate perspective and deep concerns. Furthermore, they have been so shaped by cultural influences that have permeated their thinking and fueled their attitudes that they have seldom paused to examine critically their positions and reactions to the issues that so inflame their passions.

Pastors and church leaders have a responsibility to serve each group, as well as to acknowledge their own particular cultural and generational biases that may be conveniently masked by theological and ecclesiological rationales.¹²

When doctrinal content is the main organizing principle in seeking to “pass on” or nurture the life of faith, there is a greater tendency while encouraging people not only to believe in certain points of doctrine, to also suggest or insist that they be expressed in a way that conforms to a particular way of thinking and processing information. This is true whether the insisting is on the part of the congregation itself, its leaders, or various combinations of both. Gibbs points out how this surfaces in the often incongruent ways that traditional, modern, or postmodern modes of thinking interact, or fail to interact with each other. Thus, in a society where contrasting world views and ways of processing information exist along side of each other, not only in the same community but also in the same congregation, assuming that there is significance and importance to the content of what we actually believe, difficulties can arise not only when it is not articulated in a way that honors the Reality to which it points, but also in the way we go about thinking about it in the first place. If some kind of doctrinal consensus is important, and our congregations do indeed consist of groups that represent at least three different ways of processing information, approaches to baptismal preparation that use doctrinal statements as the primary organizing motif are destined to run into difficulty when the hearers do not share the same ways of thinking about things as those presenting them. Those who might still decide to join the faith community under such circumstances do so at the cost of either short-changing genuine consensus (people not fully “buying in” because it does not make

¹²Eddie Gibbs, ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 12.

sense), or integrity (people “buying in” without it making sense, and thus separating their spiritual life from their intellectual life).

But even if it were possible to somehow convert everyone to a uniform world view, and if we were able to avoid the problems that can arise when content is emphasized in a way that undermines its essence, the more contemporary assumptions referred to earlier by Margaret Miles which are somewhat implicit in content-oriented approaches, that the achievement of doctrinal consensus will necessarily result in spiritual transformation, remains problematic.¹³ A transformed way of life goes beyond just getting the information correct (as significant as that might be), to the engagement of the whole person. Selecting the right fertilizers, trellises, and garden implements is not quite the same thing as gardening. Despite the fact that some things will grow reasonably well regardless of our efforts, and other things fail to flourish despite our best efforts, gardening happens, not just when we are well equipped and become properly *informed*, but when we actually engage in the *practice* of gardening. There is something that happens in the actual working of the soil that no amount of prior instruction can capture. We must put ourselves in the place where growth happens, even though the growth itself is well beyond our control and not dependent on our ability to describe it. In a similar way, Dykstra describes the practices like this:

They are not, finally, activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. . . . In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practices of God.¹⁴

¹³See references to her comments on page 55 of this project.

¹⁴Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 66.

A Practice-Centered Approach

A content-centered approach to learning the art of gardening suggests the image of a thoughtful, receptive learner with an open book in one hand, a pen in the other, a diagram of a rake, and an ear tuned to the instruction of a well-versed teacher, eager to apply what is being learned. A practice-centered approach however, suggests a contrasting image. It is that of a learner surrounded by the implements of farming along side of other learners with various levels of experience, their hands buried deeply in the soil, discussing and reflecting on what is in the books and what is happening as they tend to the living plants around them. Both are learning about gardening, but one is becoming a gardener.

What I am proposing here is a shift in the way Adventists go about preparing people for membership in the church that would make the practices rather than doctrinal statements the organizing motif. In addition to avoiding some of the problems mentioned above, a practice-oriented approach would not set people so much on a course of intellectual *indoctrination*, although learning and reflecting on content would certainly be an important part of it, as a path that would lead to *participation* and the process of *transformation*. In this approach, instead of *primarily* seeking ways to weave elements of the practices into what is largely instruction in doctrine, this approach would seek to integrate doctrine into what would largely be the facilitation of the practices. What a candidate would experience would be less a course of doctrinal instruction that might include some exposure to Christian practices, and more an opportunity to engage in the practices of the faith, noticing how they are enhanced as they are informed by doctrinal

content, and in turn, how that content is informed by taking part in the practices themselves. Instead of primarily being informed about photosynthesis and being loaded down with gardening tools with a little exposure here and there to some plants, it would be an opportunity to immerse oneself into the middle of growing things, and then notice how the various gardening resources can enhance the growth that is taking place, even as one reflects upon and tries to grasp what is being experienced.

Advantages of a Practice-Centered Approach

Given the fact that the content of faith is so important for Adventists, an approach which would center in the practices would be particularly helpful for several reasons. First, the practices provide the right container for holding doctrinal convictions. Not only do they, in many cases, provide connection with the long tradition of the practice of the Christian faith and, as such, provide continuity with those who have gone before us, they also provide a means of keeping theological concepts from becoming disconnected from the actual living of the Christian life. This provides some insulation against the tendency for the life of faith to become a matter of defending abstract propositions rather than living out embodied realities.

Second, the use of the practices provides a way for a way for people to enter into the life of faith in a manner which reduces the risk of the way we process information becoming an obstacle to engaging either the content of the faith or the practices themselves. Even if Adventists differ about the details or way in which God created, they can still enter into the worship of the Creator together if the practice of worship is what takes precedence. Even if there is difference of opinion on whether the satisfaction

theory of the atonement or the moral influence theory best represents the work of Christ for us, communion can be shared with each other because we acknowledge that atonement and reconciliation is in fact what we celebrate in Christ. This does not solve all the problems or tensions that occur between people who approach the life of faith with traditional, modern or post-modern assumptions, but it does provide a way in which they can come together and engage in common practices, and then allow those practices, and the God who is encountered in the midst of them, to bring about transformation. Focusing on the practices does not make the content or the way we think about it unimportant, nor as Dykstra noted,¹⁵ does it suggest that there are no absolutes. But it does provide a more relational context in which to engage the content of faith together, and a genuine place of unity in which we can be enriched by respectful dialogue and where a variety of insights can be shared, rather than to allow differences in perspective to unnecessarily divide us.¹⁶ Where honest differences in regard to the understanding of a particular point of doctrine exist, or where people have a difficult time thinking in certain ways, the practices provide common ground on which we can come together in living out the life-style patterns of the faith in a way that both includes and transcends the explanations we give to them.

Third, the practices draw us into the community of faith which surrounds us and

¹⁵Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 56.

¹⁶This is not to suggest a community afflicted with a kind of “prophetic torpor” as described by Carol Lakey Hess, Caretakers of Our Common House (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 46, in which there is a superficial kind of community based on false courtesy and resulting in “communities of pretense,” but rather one in which there are “genuine relationships that probe life’s issues deeply and honestly,” a place where people “are free to tell the truth.” It is, however, to suggest a community that is rooted in a Reality larger than itself that makes such discussion possible. Not that, as Dr. Hess pointed out in some helpful early reflections on the content of this paper, does this solve all the problems. Even when we agree on the practices, we may still find much to contend about in terms of the style in which they are expressed. But at least it moves the discussion to a more helpful arena.

supports us in our spiritual growth. While some of the practices may include elements of solitude, they always take place in the context of community. Ironically, even the rugged individualism that is so much a part of life in the United States, (along with other patterns that Dykstra describes as “patterns of mutual self-destruction”¹⁷), testifies to the power of the community to shape us. As Dykstra also observes, “So many strong socializing and enculturating forces are at work in people’s lives that the formative power of faith communities, especially congregations, seems weak in comparison.”¹⁸ But despite the fact that Christian faith communities do not always do it as well as they should, to the extent that they genuinely engage in worship, (looking to God who is both present within, but who also transcends their community), and living in the awareness of God’s unconditional love, they provide a context in which the transformation that is brought about by grace can be experienced.¹⁹ It is in the midst of this kind of community that people learn the practices largely by practicing them alongside of others who are practicing them as well.

Fourth, the practices may actually help to mitigate against the temptation to pastoral or even denominational narcissism. Carol Lakey Hess’ work on Narcissism in teaching is very helpful here.²⁰ Building on the myths of Narcissus, Echo, and the work of contemporary theorists, she describes the phenomena of Narcissistic Pedagogy:

¹⁷Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 87.

¹⁸Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 83.

¹⁹The centrality of grace is particularly important here as a corrective to any tendency to begin to think of either correct information or the practices themselves as the center of focus, or a means of securing God’s favor.

²⁰Carol Lakey Hess, “When Narcissus Teaches: Teaching, Mentoring and the Danger of Narcissism,” unpublished paper shared with her class “Spirituality and Education” during the Fall Semester of 2002 at the Claremont School of Theology.

A narcissistic teacher expects that his or her students will mirror his or her needs, especially needs for admiration and loyalty. Because of the power dynamic inherent in educational relationships, students can easily become “narcissistic supplies” at the teacher’s “disposal.” . . . Students in narcissistic learning environments, in order to survive, learn to “accommodate” to and gratify the teacher’s needs. Usually, this also requires suppressing their own intellectual needs and ideas. This can prevent individuation and lead to “false-self” dynamics.²¹

Relationships very similar to teacher-student relationships often also exist between pastor and parishioner, especially at those times when people are thinking seriously about what it means for them to be part of a faith community. The desire to see oneself mirrored in those you are seeking to mentor is every bit as much an issue among pastors and other religious leaders as it is among teachers. Referencing the work of Alice Miller, Carol Lakey-Hess describes how often it is gifted people who seem to be able to tune into the needs of a narcissistically inclined leader, and mirror what it is that they are looking for. Unfortunately what they present is not the real self, but, an unconscious need for approval, a false self.²²

While the practices in and of themselves do not guarantee immunity from narcissistic relational dynamics between a pastor and a parishioner,²³ the emphasis on the practices shifts the focus from the pastor to the practice, and how the individual encounters God in the midst of the practice rather than in the midst of the pastor’s explanation. While instruction in how to do the practices is important, the most significant instruction takes place as the practices themselves, or as God who is present in

²¹Hess, “When Narcissus Teaches,” 11-12.

²²Hess, “When Narcissus Teaches,” 16.

²³The section in Carol Lakey Hess’ paper “When Narcissus Teaches: Teaching, Mentoring and the Danger of Narcissism,” entitled “Know Thyself” (page 21ff) provides some helpful counsel to teachers, and also to pastors, about the importance of the instructor being aware of their own narcissistic tendencies.

the midst of the practices, encounters the practitioner.

This is not, however, to say that the pastor has no voice, or that no denominational perspective is presented. Complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable. By the ways that the practices are taught and debriefed, the voices of those teaching and providing direction, and of the faith communities they represent, will be heard. In fact, all information that comes to us passes through the filters of the messenger. To put it more positively, both individuals and faith communities have insights and perspectives that matter to them and that they are eager to share. It is to say, however, that in the midst of this process, it is important that individual voices, those who are somehow being “instructed,” not be muted or restated in such a way as to violate their integrity. To return to our earlier illustration, while gardeners inevitably have a role in shaping the growth of the plants they tend (there are lots of legitimate ways to trim ivy that do not violate the nature of the kind of plant it is), they need to be careful that they not try to shape it into something that it is not (e.g., no amount of trimming and scaffolding will make ivy into a great shade tree). Even in the midst of important perspectives and insights (content) that might be shared in the process, keeping the focus on the process itself (the practices), and seeking to make sure that the individual voice and experience of the person learning is not muted, but in fact encouraged, the tendency of the those learning to form a “false self” in response to individual or denominational “narcissistic dynamics,” would be reduced.

Toward a Practice-based Approach in the Context of Adventism

So then, what would an approach to preparing people for membership that sought to build on the framework of the practices rather than doctrinal statements look like in the

context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? To reiterate what I stated earlier, even with the levels of flexibility and innovation in the most recently published materials, all of the approaches are formed around the framework of doctrinal themes. Though Adventists resist the idea of a formal creed, there are currently 27 fundamental points of doctrine²⁴ upon which Adventists generally agree, and which serve as a practical reference in seeking to define their doctrinal identity. The relationship of the topics covered in the three main sets of baptismal materials currently in use among Adventists, to the fundamental points of doctrine is illustrated in Figure 4.1. Visualizing it this way is helpful for several reasons. First, because it illustrates what the approach is that I am suggesting needs to be modified. Second, because it summarizes what the specific content areas are that will need to be addressed in order for some of the unique contributions of the Adventist voice not to be lost in the process. This moves the dialogue in the direction suggested earlier, towards the issue of how these points of doctrine are incorporated into the practices of the faith, rather than how to find ways to incorporate the practices into our doctrinal assertions. Third, on a practical level, because Adventist approaches have been so firmly tied to the fundamental beliefs of the church, it indicates those areas that need to be addressed in some significant way if a practice-based paradigm is to have credibility with those who are unsure about changing paradigms. Some Adventists might have a difficult time shifting paradigms if they felt any of the

²⁴Good sources for a further explanation of what Adventists believe are, in order of helpfulness: Richard Rice, Reign of God, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997); and one that is organized directly around the 27 points of doctrine, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988). Rice's work in particular does an excellent job in articulating a coherent theological framework within which to develop Adventist belief. If a doctrine-centered approach to baptismal preparation were to be preferred, Rice's work would provide much better scaffolding.

27 Fundamental Beliefs	It's My Choice	Reason to Believe	ChristWise
The Word of God	Salvation / Great Controversy	Divinity	Scriptures
The Trinity	Second Coming of Jesus	Rebellion	The Trinity
God the Father	Creation and the Sabbath	Humanity	The Great Controversy
God the Son	Standards	Revelation	The Experience of Salvation
God the Holy Spirit	Symbols	Jesus	Baptism
Creation	Spirituality	Response	Creation
The Nature of Man	Spiritual Gifts	Love	The Law of God
The Great Controversy	The State of the Dead	Joy	The Sabbath
Life, Death & Res. of Jesus	The Sanctuary	Future	Life, Death & Res. of Christ
Experience of Salvation	Baptismal Vows	Purpose	The Lord's Supper
The Church			Spiritual Gifts
Mission of the Church			The Church
Unity in the Body of Christ			Death and Resurrection
Baptism			The Second Coming
The Lord's Supper			Millennium & End of Sin
Spiritual Gifts			The New Earth
Gift of Prophecy			Stewardship
The Law of God			Christian Behavior
The Sabbath			Marriage and the Family
Stewardship			Christ's Ministry in Heaven
Christian Behavior			Mission of the Church
Marriage and Family			
Christ's Ministry in Heaven		Note: With the exception of column one which contains a list of the fundamental beliefs, each column contains a list of the topics covered in that particular set of studies. They are listed as they occur. No line to line correlation of topics from one column to the other is intended. Additionally, the importance of inclusive language has not yet been fully realized in Adventist publications. The categories here are as they actually appear, with my apologies.	
Second Coming of Christ			
Death and Resurrection			
Millennium and end of Sin			
The New Earth			

Figure 4.1 Selected Seventh-day Adventist Baptismal Materials

uniqueness of what makes them Adventist appeared to be lost in the process. Fourth, it also reflects that not all of the material currently in use gives equal weight to all points of doctrinal understanding. This at least implies that detailed understandings of all the fine points of what might be included under the umbrella of Adventist doctrine do not have to be fully mastered in order to enter into and fully participate in the life of the church. While all things have significance, some things are more central and foundational, with others eliciting higher levels of discussion and debate.

Even though we can assume a certain level of agreement among Adventists as to what the fundamental doctrinal points are,²⁵ formulating a set of practices that would be equally understood and recognized by Adventists across the board is moving into new territory. Though certainly not unaware of, or resistant in any way to, participation in the practices, they are simply not used to thinking about them in quite this way. While it is not difficult to find an abundance of emphases on developing personal spirituality and serving others out of love at the heart of Adventist life, my perception is that most Adventists would still tend to define their church's identity primarily in terms of its distinctive doctrinal convictions. The legitimacy of Sabbath-keeping, for example, which is both one of the distinctive characteristics of Adventism and a rich spiritual practice, within Adventism is more typically expressed and/or defended in terms of its doctrinal correctness, than its experiential richness.

²⁵Within Adventism, both because the 27 statements of fundamental beliefs, at least in theory, are not considered to be absolute, and because of the nature of on-going reflection and critical inquiry, there are always statements or formulations of these beliefs that are being scrutinized and/or challenged. Even so, they still pretty well define the significant portions of the landscape that need to be addressed when talking about Adventism.

Second, for many Adventists, terms like “tradition” and “spiritual practices” do not always generate helpful images. Drawing from roots sunk deeply into the soil of the reformation and radical reformation, tradition too often carries the connotation of something “man-made” which may lack scriptural foundations or legitimacy.²⁶ Also, since the Adventist church has had internal struggles over legalistic tendencies, there is a certain amount of understandable caution about things that might undermine the centrality of God’s grace, and which might become something we do to earn God’s favor. Because some Adventists have at times experienced Sabbath-keeping, aspects of health reform, and other lifestyle issues in ways that have not kept grace central, a move toward an emphasis on the practices could meet with concern and resistance. Movement toward a practice-based approach in Adventism needs to be sensitive to this dynamic, both in terms of possible resistance by those who fear that grace would not be kept central, and in terms of those who might actually apply it that way.

Survey of Adventist Pastors

Interested in how responsive Adventist pastors might be to such an approach, as a part of my reflections on this project an informal survey was conducted of pastors in the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.²⁷ Respondents were

²⁶Passages like, “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mark 7:7 NIV), have helped to reinforce a level of cautiousness about embracing religious traditions in general.

²⁷The survey was sent to all the pastors in the Southeastern California Conference who were listed in the 2004 Conference directory. This includes all of Southern California with the exception of Los Angeles and Ventura counties. Out of 138 surveys sent, there were 49 responses (approximately 35%), with 7 returned as undeliverable. This informal survey was intended simply to engage other pastors in the conversation and get a general feeling of their perceptions, not as a sample that would necessarily have

asked to give their reaction to a number of statements on a five point scale (1, “not at all;” 2, “to some extent;” 3, “partially;” 4, “for the most part;” 5, “entirely”). Interestingly, when asked if they believed that their identity as Seventh-day Adventists was best defined

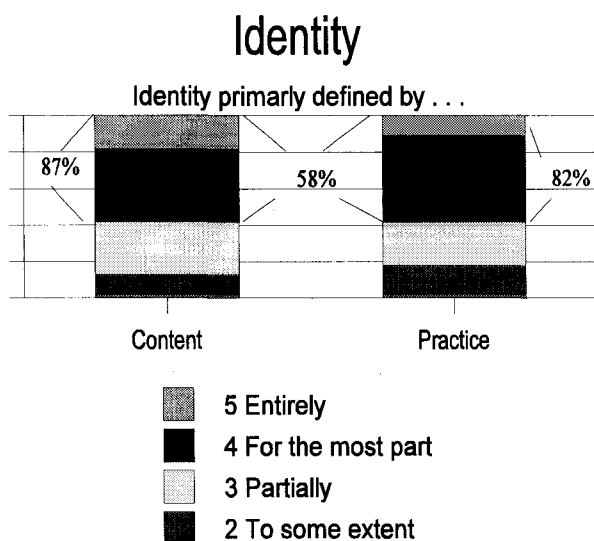


Figure 4.2 Content / Practice Comparison for the way Identity is Defined

by doctrinal statements (Figure 4.2), 87% of the respondents selected a 3 or higher number (29% selecting 3; 40%, 4; and 18%, 5). And when asked if their identity as Seventh-day Adventists was best defined by lifestyle patterns, 82% responded with a 3 or higher (24%, 47% and 11% respectively). In theory at least, it would seem that these Adventist pastors are reluctant to make too sharp of

a distinction between doctrine or practice as being what defines them. However, when asked about where their primary focus is in the way they go about preparing people for membership in the church (teaching), the percentages began to show a shift in the direction of content (Figure 4.3). While 87% still selected 3 or higher for the statement that indicated content to be the primary area of focus, 79% selected 3 or higher for the

implications of statistical significance for either pastors in this conference, or for pastors serving the Seventh-day Adventist church in other places. The survey instrument can be viewed in more detail in the Appendix.

statement indicating practice as the primary area of focus. While the closeness of those responses may still indicate a sense of ambivalence about this issue, it is interesting to note that the respondents selecting 4 or higher show a sharper divergence (45% content, 34% practice), whereas in the question concerning identity responses of 4 or higher were virtually the same, although with a slightly stronger statement in favor of content (58% each). In spite of the closeness of doctrine and practice in theory, when it comes to how preparing people for membership is actually done, the focus appears to show a tendency to shift in the direction doctrinal content taking the primary place.

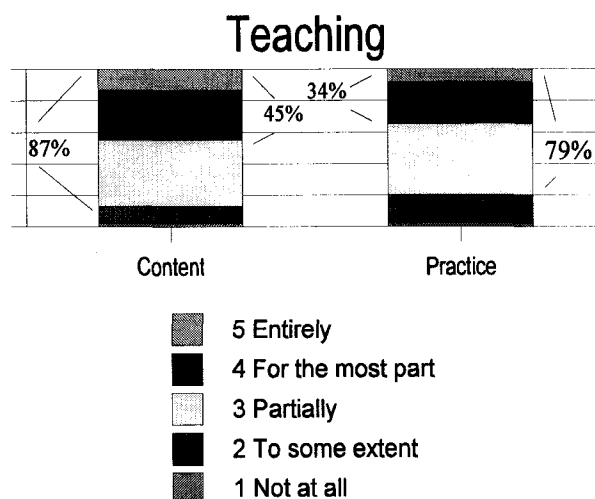


Figure 4.3 Content / Practice Comparison of how Identity is Taught.

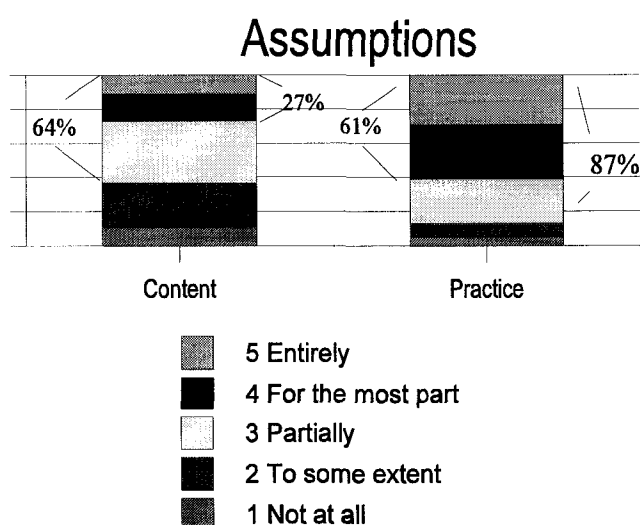


Figure 4.4 Assumptions Concerning the Primacy of Content or Practice

Respondents were also asked to assess their general assumptions about whether correct theological understandings would result in authentic Christian lifestyles, to which 64% responded with a 3 or higher (37%, 16%, 11% respectively). When then asked if their general assumption was that living the patterns of an

authentic Christian lifestyle provided the best context for sound theology to emerge, the responses of 3 or above increased to 87% (26%, 32%, 29% respectively). While content certainly remains significant, it would appear that the power of lifestyle patterns to inform theology is more strongly perceived. This is reflected in the responses of 4 or above for the assumptions regarding content and practice being 27% and 61% respectively.

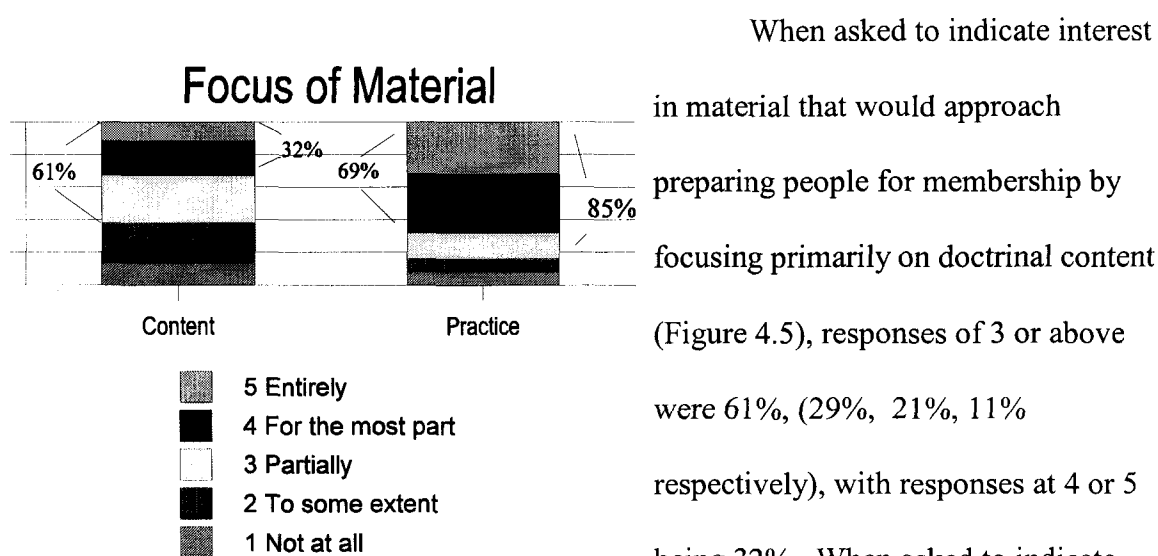


Figure 4.5 Interest in Content verses Practice
Centered Material

would focus primarily on life style patterns and then reflecting on the doctrinal content in that context, the response of 3 or above rose to 85%, (16%, 37%, 32% respectively), with those of 4 or 5 being 69%.

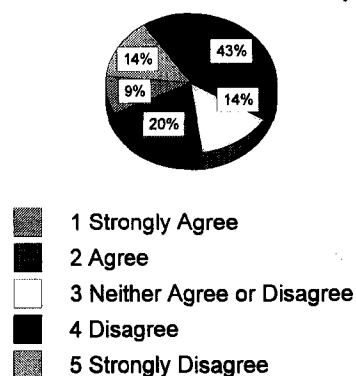
This interest in material that focuses on a practice-oriented approach is reflected in the remaining responses. When asked to reflect on the way they see faith actually being effectively passed on to others, (by selecting between teaching content, involving people in practices, or writing in their own thoughts), responses broke down as follows: 14% indicated that this came about as a result of accurately teaching the content of our

beliefs; 35% indicated that it came as a result of involving people in the life-style patterns or practices of the Christian life; 27% specifically indicated that it came about as a combination of both content and practice; 8% indicating that the importance of living out a personal relationship with God; and an additional 16% were either not responsive to the question or too divergent to categorize. These responses seem to be consistent with the responses to the previous statements, again indicating both an interest and a willingness to move in the direction of a more practice-oriented approach.

That moving in this direction is indeed a perceived need among this group is further underscored by responses that indicated their level of satisfaction with current materials made available by the church for the purpose of preparing people for membership in the church. When asked to respond to the statement,

Published Material

Published Material is Satisfactory



“Overall I am happy with materials that are available to me to prepare people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.” 9% strongly agreed, 20% indicated that they agreed, 14% neither agreed or disagreed, 43% disagreed, and 14% strongly disagreed (Figure 4.6). Additional written comments by several of the respondents further confirmed that some of the dissatisfaction that exists is tied to the material not relating enough to how we actually live.

Overall, it would appear that among the pastors that responded to the survey in the

Figure 4.6 Satisfaction with Published Material

Southeastern California Conference, there is an awareness of the importance of nurturing lifestyle patterns in the process of preparing people for membership in the church, and a desire for materials and approaches that would help facilitate that process. While there are pastors that are quite happy with current materials that focus primarily in the area of content and do not feel the need of much else, it would appear that many more are both open to and even welcoming of more practice-oriented approaches that would continue to take the content of what we believe seriously. In this respect, at least among this particular group of pastors, it does not appear that one could expect any significant barriers to moving in the direction of a practice-based approach.²⁸

Additionally, several of the pastors surveyed in their comments expressed that regardless of whether one was to take a content or practice-oriented approach, what is of greatest importance is that a responsive loving relationship with God be kept central. This reaffirms again the sensitivity to maintaining a grace-centered relational approach to spiritual life, and avoiding approaches that might ring of legalism. This underscores that it will be important when suggesting approaches to Adventist pastors, that this aspect of Christian practices be not only implicit but explicit as well.

²⁸ Again, it is important to note that this was an informal survey, seeking only to see what areas of concern might surface as pastors thought about content and practice in the context of preparing people for memberships. It was not meant to constitute part of an argument that would seek to characterize or make definitive statements about pastors in this particular conference or Adventist pastors in general, but rather an attempt to listen to their responses and see what kind of helpful things in regard to the development of this project might emerge. Further, the Southeastern California Conference is one of the most progressive conferences within the Adventist Church and as such may not fully or accurately reflect the perceptions of all Adventist pastors in North America, even less so world-wide.

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPING A PRACTICE-BASED MODEL FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

Initial Considerations

One of the first things that becomes apparent in considering what such an approach might look like for Adventists is the wide spectrum of form and expression that practices include. Those taking the form of religious rituals, and which may have a more sacramental feel about them, derive much of their richness from the fact that they do not change much over time, even though they may be shaped to some extent by their cultural and historical location. Included among these are the celebration of the Lord's Supper, baptism, the rhythm of Sabbath-keeping, sacred reading, prayer, various spiritual disciplines, etc.

Other practices may be less tied to a particular ritual or activity, focusing more on the idea that is embodied in the activity. There may be a wide variety of expressions all flowing out of the same core practice. The practice of hospitality, for example, might include such things as providing food for the hungry, sponsoring a child through Compassion International, volunteering time to work with children with special needs, or other acts of service and inclusion. Other examples might also include family worship traditions, types of prayer, or creative expressions of personal faith through journaling or the arts, etc.

Still others will reflect various combinations of the above depending on the overall context in which they are practiced, sometimes assuming very traditional forms and other times more contemporary expressions. Included here are the practices of discernment, honoring our bodies, giving and receiving spiritual direction, etc.

Awareness of this wide spectrum of the types of spiritual practices is important when considering how to develop a practice-based approach that encompasses all aspects of our lives, instead of being limited to only certain facets.

A second area of consideration involves the ties that exist between the practices, the themes embedded in them, and the various beliefs that comprise Adventist doctrinal identity. Because, as noted in the previous chapter, the idea of defining themselves in terms of practices is new territory for Adventists, this project as a first venture into that arena does not claim to be either comprehensive or definitive. These are among the first words spoken, not the final concluding remarks. It does, however, attempt to be suggestive and at least illustrative of how Adventist lifestyle patterns might be drawn together in ways that help express Adventists express who they are, and serve as containers for Adventist doctrinal convictions.¹

Third, attempting to define Adventism in terms of practices is in many ways much more challenging and difficult than doing so solely in terms of doctrinal statements. Because life is not experienced as a number of individually compartmentalized pieces that stay obediently in the places we have designated for them, but rather as elements that weave together, overlap, and leak into each other's categories, there is an inherent messiness about life and the practices that engage it. Like the ingredients in a recipe, doctrinal ideas can be easily sorted, measured, categorized, and stored. But once they are mixed together into batter and baking begins, it becomes much more difficult to sort out where one stops and another begins. The level of overlap that occurs in the mixing, baking, eating, and in terms of the practices, living out the patterns of the Christian life,

¹An additional area to explore would be how other Christian religious practices might be incorporated into Adventism in a way that both enhances, and yet retains, Adventist uniqueness.

reflects the reality that categories need to remain somewhat fluid, and in some cases more suggestive than definitive. As Dean and Foster note, attempts to classify the practices have the effect of

render[ing] them tidier than they actually are. Practices have persisted through the centuries in “families,” loose categories with enduring significance for Christian identity. Admittedly, delineating “families” of practices is an artificial exercise, since practices overlap, interweave, evolve and intersect over time.²

In reality, like eating a slice of bread, this is probably less of a problem when it comes to enjoying the bread, and yet trying to articulate all the various nuances of the practice of eating it, and what happens as it becomes a part of your life experience, is more complex and challenging.

The Connections between Practice and Content

As was alluded to in the second area of consideration mentioned above, because Adventism is as invested as it is in its doctrinal identity, an important part of the process of developing a practice-based approach for Adventists is to explore the connections that exist between the practices and the themes embedded in them, particularly those that reflect the fundamental beliefs that comprise Adventist doctrinal identity.³ Understanding how practices provide containers for doctrinal beliefs would provide an important bridge for a shift in focus. Using the Lord’s Supper as an example (figure 5.1) one can see how

²Dean and Foster, Godbearing Life, 112.

³While the 27 fundamental beliefs represent significant areas of emphasis in the Adventist Church, they certainly do not exhaust all the richness of Christian teaching and experience that will surface in the practices. While the preparation of people for membership aims at engaging all of the fundamental beliefs at some point in the process, it certainly should not be limited to them.

taking part in this practice could open the door for reflection on a number of doctrinal themes.

Practice	Embedded Themes	Doctrine
The Lord's Supper	Sacrificial Love (Body of Christ Broken/ Life given)	Life, Death & Resurrection of Jesus
	Body of Christ united	Unity in the Body of Christ The Church
	Body of Christ broken	Experience of Salvation The Church
	Relational / Immanent presence of God in the Practice	The Trinity God the Father God the Son God the Holy Spirit
	Anticipation of the Future	Second Coming of Christ Death & Resurrection Millennium and end of Sin The New Earth

Figure 5.1 Themes and Doctrinal Teachings Embedded in the Lord's Supper

Other more contemporary expressions of spiritual practices would also provide avenues for people to engage various points of doctrine. One such practice (which finds multiple expressions) as suggested by Stephanie Paulsell is "Honoring the Body" (Figure 5.2).⁴ This practice comes to us more in the form of an attitude embodied in collections of actions encompassing such issues as adornment, bathing, touching, fasting, sexuality, health, etc., that when engaged in, appropriately honor the body. This practice invites people to touch and taste and celebrate the goodness of what God has created, or in some cases by limiting these experiences, to become more self-aware or enter into solidarity

⁴Stephanie Paulsell, "Honoring the Body," in Practicing Our Faith, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 13-27.

Practice	Embedded Themes	Doctrine
Honoring the Body	Sacredness of our Bodies	Christian Behavior ⁵ The Nature of Man ⁶ God the Holy Spirit God the Son
	Affirmation of Physical Life	The Law of God
		Marriage and Family The Sabbath Death and Resurrection The New Earth Creation

Figure 5.2 Themes and Doctrinal Teachings Embedded in Honoring the Body

with others who are suffering. These examples illustrate how the practices, both in traditional and contemporary expression, can become vehicles through which participants reflect on the meaning of God's presence in their lives in light of the various doctrines that the practice engages.

The Complexity of the Relationship

Returning to the issue of complexity, the third area of consideration previously mentioned, the previous two examples also illustrate how the doctrines engaged by

⁵"Christian Behavior" encompasses such themes as purity, health, modesty, choices in entertainment, etc., building on the concept of our bodies being the temple of the Holy Spirit.

⁶The Adventist perspective, flowing from a Hebrew rather than Greek anthropology includes the idea of being created in God's image as whole people. Creation and physical life are good, though marred by sin. People are contingent beings and as such do not have immortal souls, but look forward to the resurrection as a time when life is restored.

individual practices overlap. Additional examples would reveal an ever-growing web of connections and points of engagement. Because multiple factors may make some of these connections more obvious or subtle, those engaging in the practices, particularly but certainly not exclusively those new to the faith, can benefit from a teacher, mentor, or spiritual director who can assist participants in noticing and exploring those connections. Reflecting once again both the community context in which practices are engaged, and the significance of spiritual direction not only as a spiritual practice itself, but also a significant reflection of what actually occurs in the process of engaging the practices, Dykstra describes this role as analogous to what coaches do.

Often a coach will teach by demonstrating something, by making one of the essential moves and asking the learner to watch. Then words begin. Questions: What did you see happen? . . . Descriptions: What I'm doing here is. . . . Explanations and reasons: What this does is . . . Soon thereafter the coach will say, 'Now you try it.' . . .

If the life of Christian faith is truly a practice of practices, shouldn't Christian education and theological teaching be more like good coaching? . . . we need others . . . who will include us in the practices as they themselves are engaged in them . . . who will show us how . . . explain to us what these practices mean . . . [and] lure us and press us beyond our current understandings. . . .⁷

This underscores the pertinence of the discussion in chapter 3 regarding the sensitivities inherent in spiritual direction being either embedded in, or at least parallel to, engaging the practices. Practice-focused approaches need to be led by those who see their role as coaches, mentors, and facilitators, or to return to an earlier metaphor, gardeners, rather than foremen overseeing a production line.

Preparing people for full participation in the life of the church then is not so much a matter of assenting to various points of doctrine (as important as that is), but rather

⁷Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 72-73.

helping them to enter into the rhythm of life that emerges as we participate in the practices together, with an eye toward doctrinal understandings that also surface as we reflect on the experience and seek for a way to articulate its meaning. In this way, learners engage the points of doctrine in the context of what they are doing and/or experiencing and grow in their understanding and experience of both. Depending on the particular practice being engaged and the setting in which it is taking place, or because of the unique circumstances of the participants, those taking part might find themselves reflecting on several different doctrinal points that all seem to surface together, or as they move from one practice to another, circling back to the same points over and over again. If those facilitating a process of engaging and reflecting on practices are sensitive to the unique experiences and individual voices of the participants, this will likely mean that the details of what content is covered at any given time, or the order in which things are dealt with, will vary from one person or group to another. However, it also means that there is greater likelihood for the experience to be not just informative but transformative as well because of the connections being made to the content of what is believed and the life patterns that are being experienced. In this case, a good resource for those leading participants through a process of preparing for baptism might less resemble tightly constructed lesson plans dictating what topics are covered when and in what order, and more of a check list of areas that need to be addressed that might surface in ways that are not entirely easy to predict.

Incorporating Adventist Resources

An additional consideration in developing an approach that would find more

acceptance than resistance in an Adventist context is that of sensitivity to developing material that would not feel too unfamiliar or uncomfortable to Adventists. Because the context in which the model would be implemented is that of preparing people for membership in the Adventist Church, it is important that the approach, while encouraging Adventists to think about things in new ways, does not create unnecessary dissonance with Adventist thought and culture.

One suggestion for addressing this issue is to make use of helpful Adventist resource material when possible. One example currently in use by Adventists for preparing people for membership in the church, A Reason To Believe, represents material that has already broken ground in moving away from simply working through the various points of doctrine to suggesting broad themes within which many of the doctrinal points are addressed.⁸ While most of these themes are still primarily doctrinal in their focus, this material opens up the landscape by modeling a more relational, inductive approach, and provides a number of places where it can be integrated with a practice-oriented approach. Working in conjunction with this material when exploring some of the doctrinal themes that emerge in a number of practices, will not only help to establish a link to Adventist material that is already in use, but also provide a way of placing the themes developed in the doctrinal material in the context of a practice paradigm. Since my purpose here is not primarily to reformulate or re-explain doctrinal positions per se, (something A Reason to Believe already does reasonably well), but to suggest a different context from which to view and understand our identity as Adventists, enfolding what already exists into the larger context of a practice-based approach would seem to be a helpful way of keeping

⁸See Figure 4.1 for a list of the themes covered.

people “on board” even as a shift in focus is suggested.

The Overlapping Nature of the Practices

It is not, however, just the doctrinal content embedded in the practices that overlap as one moves from one practice to another, but the practices themselves. While practices may be separated for the purposes of definition or description, in actuality, they are all woven together to form the fabric of a way of living, and are meant to be practiced alongside of each other. Sabbath-keeping, for example, includes within it the practices of honoring the body, corporate and individual worship, and hospitality (just to name a few of the most obvious), and vice versa. The practice of “Dying Well,” for example, may also overlap in significant ways with the practices of forgiveness, healing, honoring the body, or others. All contribute to a larger pattern that constitutes the Christian life. So even as we attempt to categorize or group practices together for the purposes of suggesting an approach, those categories themselves need to be held somewhat loosely. Indeed, the practices need to be envisioned as an integral part of an intricate web in which they occur, not independently or sequentially, but concurrently with each other. This not only emphasizes how they contribute together to a greater whole, but also helps prevent the lifestyle to which they contribute from becoming skewed or unbalanced, as the various practices provide checks and balances for each other as well. Commenting on this aspect of the practices Dykstra writes:

No one practice is the key to faith and the life of faith. The life of faith involves participation in all of them. When any particular practice is isolated from the others, its power is limited. The power of each practice is enormously enhanced, however, when it is intimately related to the others and when each is experienced as

a dimension of the whole. Telling the Christian story to one another and interpreting the Scriptures, for example, when done by people who are suffering for and with one another and who are talking about and listening attentively to one another's experiences in the world, have a power that they otherwise lack. Criticizing and resisting powers that destroy may themselves lead to the corrosion of human community if not done in a context where we also confess our own sinfulness and work to maintain and create sustaining, life-giving social institutions. In sum, we grow in any of these practices only as we come more and more to understand the significance and meaning of all of them and see how they are intimately connected to one another.⁹

Proposing an Approach

Given the importance of the practices being integrated with each other, and acknowledging that classification schemes need to remain somewhat fluid and flexible, what might an approach that seeks to root itself in the practices as a means for preparing people for church membership and nurturing their spiritual growth look like? How does one organize or go about developing a strategy for engaging them in a manner that also includes opportunities for the major fundamental doctrinal beliefs of Adventism to surface and be reflected upon in the process? Or, to put it another way, what kinds of practices are fundamental to the lifestyle that defines Seventh-day Adventist Christians?

While it has already been noted that there are a variety of ways that practices might be grouped and organized, there is a flow of moment within Christian practices that not only influences how they are shaped, but may also provide some helpful insight into how they can be organized and grouped as well. One aspect of this movement is shaped

⁹Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 45. See also Dorothy C. Bass, "Practical Theology and the Church," paper presented to the Association for Pastoral Theology, Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, Valparaiso University, April 16, 2004.

by the interplay of the two central and vital elements of awareness and responsiveness. While some practices seem to focus primarily on either enhancing awareness or responding to what we have become aware of, both elements are present in all practices. Those which focus largely upon becoming aware of God's presence (prayer, for example), inevitably results in responsive changes in the life of the person engaging in the practice. Those practices whose primary focus is on responsiveness (caring for the poor, for example) generally not only flow from some kind of an initial sense of awareness of God's presence in the world,¹⁰ but through taking part in the practice, also tend to elicit a heightened sense of awareness of God's involvement in the world. While some practices or groups of practices will tend to focus more upon one than the other, all practices assume both.

A second flow of movement that continues to surface in my reflection on Christian practices, especially when they are practiced concurrently with each other, can be illustrated by diagramming expanding concentric circles (Figure 5.3). At the center of the set of circles is the awareness of God's gracious presence to which one responds in individual ways; in the context of the close and supportive relationships of family, friends

¹⁰In some cases that initial awareness may be so faint as to be virtually non-existent, and may actually re-awaken as one becomes involved in caring for others. In such cases the initial awareness may simply reside in the awareness of the larger community from which the practice may have come, from others who may be involved in the process as well, or from responding to internal movements that might not be recognized as the nudging of the Spirit.

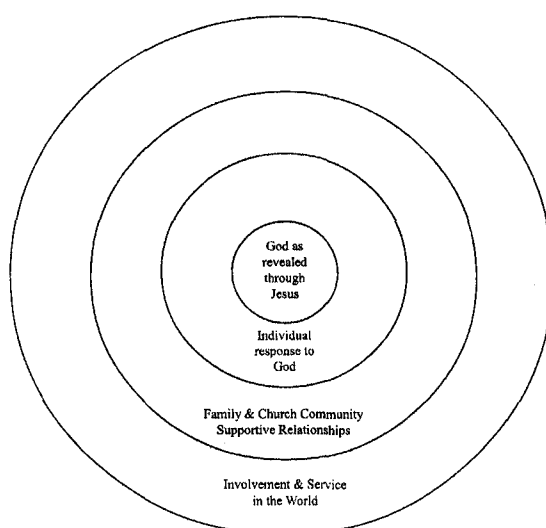


Figure 5.3 The Individual / Corporate / Community Dimensions of the Practices.

and a church community; and in the way one engages the world both vocationally and through other modes of involvement and service.¹¹ While some practices may be located primarily within one of those particular areas, they all draw from the center and extend in significant ways to the other areas as well. Further, the circles build upon themselves as one moves out from the center. God's graciousness and

presence are experienced by individuals. Individuals comprise families and church communities which extend that same grace to each other, discovering that God is present in the midst of families and communities. Families and communities of faith continue to extend that graciousness as individuals and as a community in service and compassion to the larger world around them – in the process discovering that God is uniquely present in the midst of all created reality as well. However, the movement also flows back from the outer regions to the center, as communities realize that they are interconnected as a part of the larger world, and that they are individuals who fully experience wholeness only in relationship with others in community. While this illustrates yet again the overlapping nature of the practices, and the reality that almost any categorization if pressed far enough

¹¹These dimensions of movement within Christian life have surfaced at numerous times in my theological training beginning with Dr. Charles Teel Jr. who frequently spoke of the categories of *God/me*, *God/me/others* and *God/me/others/structures*, in his course on Church in Society at Loma Linda University in the late 1970s, to more recent formulations suggested by the Leadership Institute (currently under the direction of L. Paul Jensen) which build upon the words of Jesus in John 15 and trace the same three dimensions of *Abiding in Christ*, *Loving one another*, and *Serving and bearing witness in the world*.

will blend into all the others, the internal movements of awareness and responsiveness, and the dimensions of experience through which they extend themselves, provide helpful points of reference in the process of developing a practice-oriented model.

Given, then, the fluid nature of what is experienced in the context of the practices and the limitations of any system of categorizing and sorting, rather than attempting to propose and work from a definitive model that attempts to provide either an exhaustive list or to fully capture or organize Adventist practices in a neatly wrapped package with all aspects of doctrinal understanding fully developed, I will suggest something more realistic and hopefully useful -- a model that identifies many of the key practices that can provide an adequate context for engaging and exploring the pattern of life that reflects Adventist belief and practice, and which in doing so provides a good basis for preparing people for participation in the Adventist community. In making these suggestions, I will draw both from descriptions of practices already common in the literature, and perhaps suggest some that are less common, in an attempt to describe the patterns that I find emerging out of my reflection on the literature and my experience as an Adventist. Again, because of the overlapping nature of the practices and the variety of possible classification schemes, what is proposed here does not seek to be either exhaustive or definitive, but rather suggestive (perhaps even somewhat arbitrary at times) and is certainly open to further refinement. But while this is just one of many possible and valid ways of configuring things, it attempts to be broad and inclusive enough to be useful as a general resource. For the purposes of this project, it also provides a place to begin.

Significant Adventist Practices

The difficulty in describing practices is that it is in essence an attempt at describing life. Life is huge, and the implications and possibilities are endless, making any list or description almost by definition inadequate or incomplete. However, while certainly not exhaustive or comprehensive, each of the suggested practices or groupings of practices which follow provide a way to introduce people to the various dynamics of spiritual life in an Adventist context that are, or should be, at the heart of who Adventists are. While specific doctrinal perspectives will give most of these a significant Adventist flavor, each seeks to help people engage the pattern of living within which the doctrinal perspectives are understood. But before articulating a suggested list, certain foundational presuppositions need to be reaffirmed.

Foundational Presuppositions

While these points have already been addressed in the preceding chapters of this project, it is important to reiterate at the beginning of any suggested list the presuppositions that lie at the heart of Christian spiritual practices. The most significant of these is that it is God as revealed in Jesus that is the central focus from which Christian patterns of living emerge. Furthermore, the practices occur within the context of a relationship with God that is defined by God's grace extended freely to all, with any Christian practices that result being firmly rooted in a clear affirmation of that grace, and lived out in a grateful loving responsiveness to the God who extends it. It is in the context of a relationship of responsiveness to God's love that the practices are intended to

be entered into, not as a means to qualify for it.

Furthermore, while this response is individual and personal, it is something we do as a part of a larger community of believers. Entering a community of faith is not just a matter of an individual loving response to God marked by assenting to a series of beliefs, but becoming part of the people of God and being woven into the fabric of the relational community of the church. The implications of that for the process of preparing people for membership in the church is that such a process should both model and help participants become a part of that larger community. This means that the kind of relational connecting that happens within the preparation process may be as important as any information that is otherwise conveyed. This also means that as important as making use of good resources in such a process, is the preparation of those who will facilitate the process.

Also noted earlier in Chapter 3 was the importance of preserving the individual voices of the participants as they engage in and reflect on the practices so they are able to enter into the process as fully as possible. This involves awareness of what it means to participate both as a member of a practicing community, and as a person with a specific gender, age, ethnicity, economic status, etc. Care needs to be taken so that individuals are not diminished either in the way they engage various practices or the way doctrinal content is reflected upon in light of them.¹² Yet, because participants are contemplating

¹²Consider, for example a group taking part in an expression of the practice of hospitality through feeding the homeless. Some doctrinal ideas they might reflect upon in this process are what it means for all of us to be created in God's image, and perhaps what the Biblical images are that help us to understand more fully what it means to be in God's image. As these points are considered, it is important not only to engage material that describes God's compassion for the poor and needy (a kind of condescending graciousness), but also that which shows God uniquely present in the person of the poor and needy (a graciousness that fully identifies with the person). Social or economic standing does not diminish the

being a part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it is important that the unique voice of the Adventist Church community has opportunity to be heard clearly and even persuasively throughout the process as well, not in an overpowering or compelling manner, but in respectful and gracious dialogue.

With these presuppositions reaffirmed, setting the context in which the practices are engaged, the next task involves suggesting key practices that are descriptive of Adventist Christianity and how they might be engaged by those on the journey of preparing for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.¹³

Engaging the Scriptures

At the heart of spiritual life for Adventists, and central to their identity as a

genuineness of God's image in a person, nor one's ability to fully participate in the life of the faith community.

The youth group at the church where I currently pastor participated for many years in a homeless ministry. This provided a rich opportunity for reflection on the Biblical themes that surfaced as a result of this practice, and as a result, a deeper entering into of the practice itself. Over time our ministry to the homeless came to be less something we did *for* them, as something we *shared with* them. We still served food, but sometimes those we served joined us in serving, or in helping out in other ways. Instead of just handing out meals, we sat and shared the food together as we listened to their stories and shared our own. The practice became an oasis in the midst of life where we shared a more profound reality together, their voices a little less muted, and our sense of community a little more whole. Participating in the practice provided opportunities for us to deepen our understanding, experience the life of faith more fully, encounter the presence of God at work, and as a result, experience transformation in ways we could not have predicted.

¹³Despite the fact that I have chosen to list engaging scripture as a distinct practice, I am in agreement with the sentiments of Bass and Dykstra, which were reiterated recently in a presentation made by Dorothy Bass to the Association for Pastoral Theology in April of 2004. "Two essential Christian practices . . . it is impossible to imagine . . . Christian practices without them. These two are so essential to the others . . . that the authors of this book chose not to separate them out in chapters of their own but rather to enfold them into every chapter. They are prayer and Bible study. Without either one, the . . . practices . . . would collapse." Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, "Growing in the Practices of Faith," in Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, ed. Dorothy C. Bass et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 201-02.

church, is the practice of engaging the scriptures. *Adventist Christians are people who engage the scriptures.* In fact, it would be difficult to conceive of any approach to introducing people to life in the Adventist community without referencing the centrality of scripture early the process. With roots sunk deeply into the soil of the Protestant reformation and a respect for the scriptures as an inspired source of authority and guidance, Adventists see them both as the foundation upon which doctrine and practice are built, and as an important way in which personal spiritual life is nurtured.

Inviting people to participate in this practice would include opportunities to engage scripture as the collective voices of God's people down through the ages, which as they are heard in the context of their own settings and ours, become non-negotiable conversation partners in the process of developing faith and practice. Of particular interest would be the accounts of those who were most closely connected to the life and ministry of Jesus, and whose testimony was regarded by the early church as authoritative and reliable. Recognizing that God was uniquely involved in the process in which the scriptures come to us (the doctrine of inspiration), both individually and together as a group, participants would have opportunities to look at passages of scripture, making use of tools of interpretation that allow it to be heard both against the backdrop of its own setting and ours. While the focus here is upon engaging in the practice of studying scripture, this is a setting in which foundational doctrinal points can be examined as well. Since this practice, given the centrality of scripture in Adventist life, might be among the first to be explored, it would be a good place to examine some of those passages of scripture that are expressive of the nature of God, humanity, and how the scriptures

understand themselves. Other issues that arise out of the life situations of the participants could also be addressed as parts of their individual stories are told in the context of the larger story that the scriptures represent.

A second dimension of engaging scripture that would also be addressed here is that of seeing them not merely as a source of information, but as a means of communication by which we make a personal connection with God. This involves using scripture devotionally, not only as a means of hearing how God has spoken to people in the past and what the implications for that may be today, but also how God speaks to us personally as I seek to be responsive to the movement of the Spirit as I listen prayerfully and reflectively to the scriptures. Opportunities to experience *lectio divina*, praying a psalm, or similar practices that invite us into a contemplative mode of listening attentively to scripture would also be provided and debriefed. Passages of scripture that are of special interest to Adventists could be intentionally reflected upon here as well.¹⁴

While these two elements of engaging scripture, studying and connecting with God, can be described separately, because we are talking not so much about individual religious skills, but threads in a spiritual fabric, they exist alongside of each other and are intertwined together. Contemplative approaches to scripture are shaped by the tools of study, and the study of scripture ought never to be separated from its personal contemplative quality. These are not separate compartments, but complementary

¹⁴In this instance, care should be taken that the facilitator not use the practice of engaging scripture as a vehicle for forcing a particular outcome or doctrinal conclusion, but allow the scriptures to speak on their own. However, if done with sensitivity, the voice of the Adventist community (for example, “typically what Adventists have tended to hear in this passage is . . .”, or “what I often hear is . . .”) could be shared as part of a debriefing and reflecting process without muting or diminishing individual voices, or implying that participants ought to come to similar conclusions. This would help diminish tendencies toward personal or institutional narcissism.

dimensions of a way of life that flow in and out of each other.

Practices of Awareness

While I am not aware of a particular practice by this name, at the heart of spirituality is a heightened sense of awareness of God's presence in the world around us, in our interactions with each other, and our own inner-worlds as well. *Adventists are (or at least ought to be) people who seek to live both with an awareness of God's presence, and also in an awareness of the pervasiveness of the brokenness that exists in all of those places as well.* Awareness results in a recognition within myself, others, and our world of the hand of the Creator who made humankind in the image of God, entrusting to them the care of the world. It also results in a recognition that the expression of this image has become distorted by the impact of sin, causing internal, relational, and environmental dissonance. Awareness of both the places of brokenness that need healing or where destructive forces need to be resisted, as well as the places where what is good flourishes and needs to be nurtured, provide perspective and direction in life.

Specific practices that seek to enhance awareness include setting aside regular devotional time, for prayer and reflection on scripture. Though not common among Adventists, the Ignatian Awareness Examen would be a valuable exercise to incorporate. Time spent in nature reflecting on the beauty and complexity of creation, solitude, silence, as well as taking time to reflect on our interactions with people or systems, are all examples of practices that could be placed under this heading. Entering into this practice would help participants not only to sample traditional practices, but also to explore both

ancient and more contemporary forms of reflection that would also help keep them alert to ways that their awareness is either heightened or diminished.

Keeping Sabbath

As is reflected in the name “Seventh-day Adventist,” one of the practices that is both central and distinctive to Adventism is that of keeping Sabbath. *Adventist Christians are people who practice keeping the Sabbath.* In a world that moves at an increasingly faster pace in its preoccupation with growth, expansion, and productivity as a measure of the value of things, few practices speak more powerfully than that of keeping Sabbath. Attempting to be faithful to the scriptural description of the practice, Adventists observe Sabbath from sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening, marking off a period of time in which they can more fully engage in, and renew their commitment to, a rhythm of life in which value is measured not in terms of how hard one works or what they produce, but in simply being God’s children.

Embedded in the practice of Sabbath are rich theological themes and relational patterns to explore.¹⁵ In the Genesis creation story, the first full day of life experienced by Adam and Eve is a day that is focused not on producing things, but upon fellowship – even God rests. Yet, according to the Sabbath commandment recorded in Exodus, the keeping of Sabbath is an expression of God being the Creator; and, in the Deuteronomy

¹⁵This is the case, even though there may be some Adventists who have not developed their understanding of Sabbath-keeping much beyond that of it being a test of obedience to God, and perhaps a day for physical rest.

version, of God being the Redeemer as well.¹⁶ It is a celebration of grace which reminds us that God, not us, is the source of both life and salvation. Sabbath-keeping also levels the playing field by inviting people to enter into the experience of rest regardless of distinctions derived from social, vocational, gender, or national identities, reminding us that we are all children of the same Creator. In the New Testament, Jesus declares it to be a gift for humankind, and the author of Hebrews, a symbol of the rest that God invites all of His people to enter into.¹⁷ Interestingly, as a part of the moral law, the entering into the practice of Sabbath-keeping comes with the same force of moral obligation behind it as the other precepts of the decalogue, indicating the significance of establishing this kind of a rhythm for Christian living. Further, drawing from the imagery in the book of Revelation which focuses on the worship of God as both Creator and Redeemer, themes that are reiterated in the message carried by the first angel of Revelation 14, Sabbath-keeping is seen to have eschatological significance in that it symbolically characterizes God's people as those who "obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus."¹⁸

In one sense, Sabbath-keeping has, at times, served a function similar to that of the liturgy and ritual of Catholicism, defining who is a part of the community and who is not. In a more helpful sense, however, it should be experienced as a way of extending the boundaries of the community to invite all to come and enter into the practice and what it represents – drawing a circle that does not intend to exclude but to embrace. As can be

¹⁶Exod. 20:8-11, Deut. 5:12-15.

¹⁷Mark 2:27, Heb. 4:1-11.

¹⁸See Rev. 4 and 5 which focus on the worship of God as Creator and Redeemer respectively, and Rev.14:6-7, 12.

seen, Sabbath-keeping, entered into as a day to set aside patterns of living that can become their own ends if not moderated, to tend to relationships, worship, rest, play, and refocus, also carries with it rich theological meaning that speaks to the heart of Adventist identity, and provides multiple opportunities to reflect on the content embedded in the practice.

Practices of Wholeness

In a manner that incorporates much of what is referred to in contemporary practice literature as “Honoring the Body,” *Adventists are people who live a lifestyle that is characterized by wholeness.* Working from the presupposition that the scriptures assume a more Hebrew than Greek anthropology, Adventists emphasize a lifestyle that focuses on the unity and interrelatedness of individual human experience. Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects of life cannot be separated or ranked in order of importance, rather all of them together is what makes us human.¹⁹ While the levels and degrees to which individual Adventists actually engage this area of practice varies, at the heart of Adventist identity, and central to many of the contributions that Adventists have become known for, is their emphasis on healthy living through diet, exercise and

¹⁹ Adventists frequently reference the imagery of Gen. 2:7 as a reflection of the nature of man in which man as a real physical creation becomes a living, conscious being when given life that only comes from God – a process that is reversed when we die, when the life that only comes from God “returns” to its source, and the physical aspects of who we are, return to the earth. There is then no conscious existence in death, but rather a period of pause until life is restored again by God at the resurrection. Of course, from the standpoint of the person who has died, as in sleep, there would be no consciousness of the passage of time, and so for them their next experience of consciousness would be in God’s presence. All of which is to say that Adventist anthropology, even though people can be described simply in terms of their personality and relational qualities, does not conceive of man as essentially a spiritual being that inhabits a body that is in some way optional, but the corporeal sensate existence is integral to who we are.

lifestyle. It is also largely out of the desire to engage this practice in a way that reflects the ministry of Jesus in caring for the physical needs of people, that the tremendous emphasis on healthcare which shapes both vocational life and missionary endeavors within Adventism finds its roots. Other lifestyle patterns that both reflect and express this emphasis on the wholeness of man include commitments to education, involvement in local and world-wide relief efforts [from local community services ministries to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)], and more recently to an increasing involvement in counseling and mental health concerns.

Within the context of these practices there are many opportunities for reflection on the theological and/or doctrinal issues that arise within them and shape them. Among the more obvious are those having to do with the nature of persons, the mission of the church, stewardship, and many of those dealing with lifestyle or behavior issues. This practice would also overlap in significant ways with Sabbath-keeping.

Practices of Anticipation

Also close to the heart of Adventism, and reflected in the second part of the name “Seventh-day Adventist,” is the anticipation of the ultimate resolution of the problem of sin that will be brought about by the second advent of Christ and what follows.

Adventists look forward in joyful anticipation to the second coming of Christ and the resolution of the problem of sin. Much of the richness of the meaning that surrounds the events of the second coming have to do with issues of resolution and closure. Because Adventists see a distortion and misrepresentation of God’s loving character as what lies at

the heart of the problem of sin in the world, and the history of humanity that followed as a living-out of people who are trying to decide whether or not they will resolve this “great controversy” in favor of trusting God and choosing the life of the kingdom over not believing and following a path rooted in other concerns, the second coming signals an end to the controversy and beginning of closure and final restoration. Adventists anticipate final closure to the problem of sin in the world and a restoration of conditions that were intended before the entrance of the issue of sin in the context of a new creation. This includes a literal beginning again in which the problem of sin is finally removed from existence permanently (as opposed to the idea of a state or place that resembles an eternally burning hell) and in which sin is no longer an issue, not because it is no longer possible, but because its destructiveness has been so convincingly demonstrated that it would never again be a viable option.

This perspective leads to a form of practice that is paradoxical in some ways. For example, while Adventists believe in living in harmony with the principles of God’s kingdom and encouraging others to do so, they also believe that they will not fully succeed in bringing about a transformed world before the second coming, but rather contribute toward a clear choice between the principles of God’s kingdom and principles opposed to God’s kingdom – and that only by the second coming and the restoration of a new earth will a final change be effected. This involves working for and living in harmony with a set of values even while knowing that the change you work for will continue to be opposed. The hope for “success” lies not so much in achieving the final outcome before the second coming, but in being faithful to the cause and to reflecting a

picture of God in the process that reflects God's true character and leads people to choose God's kingdom as the paradigm their lives will be centered in. So even when things fail here, there is hope looking to the future knowing that God's kingdom will ultimately prevail, even if it is not fully realized in our lifetimes.

This realization, in tandem with the anthropology reflected in the Adventist focus on the wholeness of people, results in a practice of dealing with death that is able to both acknowledge its reality and the loss involved, and yet still look forward in assurance and hope of resurrection and restoration. The uniqueness of the Adventist practice of "dying well"²⁰ is reflected in seeing death not as a doorway into a higher plane of existence, but as an unwelcome intruder into life. However, it is also seen as an enemy that has been defeated, for even though the loss it brings about is real, it is not ultimate or final. This allows a way to both deal with the reality, and perhaps even the injustice of the loss of a person, and still maintain a stance of assurance and joy because of the hope of the resurrection when life is restored and all things are made new.

Practices of Worship

Adventists are people who engage in worship. While obviously not unique or distinctive, and at the risk of stating the obvious, worship is indeed a practice that is central to Adventist life. In addition to meeting together regularly on Sabbath for corporate worship services, worship springs up in individual, family, private, and public contexts. While non-sacramental in nature, the rites of baptism, and the Lord's supper

²⁰This is the name given to the practice as it appears in Bass, Practicing Our Faith, 163.

(including a service of washing each other's feet) are those most frequently observed. Baby dedications, weddings, and ordinations are celebrated. Services of prayer and anointing are shared during times of special needs. Funerals and memorial services are held to acknowledge the magnitude of our losses, the blessings that we have shared as a result of a person's life, and the hope of a joyfully anticipated future of restoration. But even more than a particular service that is engaged as a community, or devotional practices entered into individually, worship is seen as an appropriate metaphor for a way of life lived in response to God's love and graciousness. It is also a practice that can be engaged and debriefed in a way that opens the door to reflection and exploration of multiple doctrinal themes.

Discernment

Adventists seek to live lives characterized by discernment. Looking to principles derived from the practice of engaging scripture, practices of awareness, and seeking to be attentive to other ways that God might be directing the church, Adventists try to live lives of integrity. Illustrative of the kinds of issues Adventists have engaged are those of military service and the issues of the relationship between church and state. Seeking to be faithful to a sense of honoring life by not participating in combat, and yet honor the authority of the government, Adventists helped develop the 1-A0 classification for those drafted into military service in the United States which allows the option of serving in medical units in order to give aid to the wounded, without having to bear arms. Also, Adventists work to preserve religious freedom, having taken firm positions on the

separation of church and state, they believe that religiously derived values should be promoted by religious groups not the arm of civil authority. While seeking guidance primarily through reflection on scripture, but also through the contributions from the writings of Ellen White (an early prophetic figure in the formation of the Adventist church), recommendations from church councils, and insights from lay-led forums of discussion and study, this is an area where there is a lot of on-going discussion within the church, and one in which Adventists could benefit from the writings of others outside their community of faith, particularly in the areas of discernment and spiritual direction. Seeking to make wise choices that honor God is also a practice that provides multiple opportunities to reflect on the teachings of the church.

Practices of Hospitality, Mission and Service

Adventists are committed to mission and service. From early ages, children raised in the Adventist community are surrounded with stories of missions and service, and given opportunities to contribute toward mission offerings. In a manner that is shaped by its anthropology, and which seeks to stay rooted in a desire to extend the love of God and the ministry modeled by Jesus through involvement in missions and service, this practice takes on multiple forms. Local churches often operate community services ministries to help provide clothing and food to those in need. Young people are often involved in service-oriented organizations sponsored by the church. In addition to paying tithe to support both local pastors and those in foreign service, other offerings are taken to help with specific mission or outreach projects, and/or support organizations like ADRA.

Those involved in healthcare fields may donate time and services to local and foreign mission projects. Students who attend Adventist colleges sometimes take a year off from studying in order to serve as a student missionary for a year, often in a teaching position, and frequently in underdeveloped countries. Also falling under the category of this practice are some of the aspects of the practice of hospitality as it is developed in the work of Ana Maria Pineda and Christine D. Pohl, although this is something that needs further attention by Adventists.²¹ A fuller embracing of the insights of the work done in the practice of hospitality would help provide a corrective to tendencies that sometimes develop which gives Adventist identity an exclusive rather than inclusive feel.

The Practice of Community

Adventists are people who live in community. This is a practice that both characterizes and challenges Adventists. On the one hand, because of the practice of keeping Sabbath on the seventh day of the week, the unique lifestyle patterns that arise out of their emphasis on wholeness and healthful living, and the tendency of concentrations of Adventists to locate in communities that surround their hospitals or institutions of higher learning, in many ways Adventists have a fairly well defined sense of community identity. On the other hand, the roots of the Adventist church sink deeply into the rugged individualism of the early to mid 1800s in the United States. At least

²¹ Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality," in Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Seaching People ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997); and Christine D. Pohl, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999). The practice of Sabbath-keeping would also be greatly enriched by incorporating many of the insights that these works contribute.

partially because of that, fully embracing the idea of an interdependent sharing community where people are vulnerable and rely upon each other when they are not in their mission mode, as opposed to the self-sufficient Christian individualist who should not have to rely upon others in any way, and which has tended to emphasize the heroes of faith primarily in terms of “Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone,” rather than a community that “bears one another’s burdens,” has sometimes proved to be a bit of a challenge.

Yet, there are encouraging practices within many Adventist congregations that foster a sense of community. In increasing numbers of places, small group ministries are forming which provide settings in which relational connections can be nurtured. The practice of foot-washing which precedes communion enacts the importance of serving and being served by each other. Through contributing funds or volunteering expertise or labor, joint endeavors are undertaken and accomplished together. Any of these can serve as good contexts in which to reflect on the theology of church as a gift-sharing, mutually supportive community, and yet this may be one of those places where the theology is better developed than the practices that contain it, and where more thoughtful work needs to be done in developing practices that enhance community.

One particularly fruitful place to further develop the practice of community which would speak directly to an approach for preparing people for membership in the church, would be that of fostering the development of intentional relationships focused on mentoring and/or spiritual friendship. Because the spiritual journey is not one that we are meant to take alone, but which needs the presence of other fellow travelers that can show

the way (mentors) and/or accompany us along the way as we follow the path together to encourage and hold us accountable (spiritual friends), facilitating the development or continuation of these kinds of relationships would be an important part of the process. On its most basic level, this would involve identifying and nurturing those relationships that may already exist, or seeking out and forming relationships like these with others who are already a part of the faith community. While this is not a distinctive practice in Adventism per se, it is an important part of the practice of community nonetheless, and should be intentionally and effectively incorporated.

Overview of the Proposed Configuration

With these categories of practice in mind, the development of an actual strategy of providing an approach that both provides opportunity to engage these practices and be adequately exposed to the content areas that are characteristic Adventist faith that is contained within them, can be illustrated by Figure 5.4. In the first column are listed the general categories of the practices addressed. The second lists some examples of individual practices that would fall under this category (note that many practices fit in more than one category). Third is a listing of what Adventists would see as significant areas of doctrinal content that should be addressed in order to hear clearly the unique voice of the Adventist community. Items marked with an asterix highlight those areas where there is significant overlap with other categories. These are intended to illustrate, not be fully comprehensive. Some of the labels in the individual practice column are drawn from Dorothy Bass' categories, others represent well known spiritual practices or

Category of Practice	Individual Practices	Examples of Doctrinal Themes Engaged
Engaging Scripture	Contextual Studies Lectio Divina Praying Scripture Devotional Study	<i>Revelation</i> - The Nature of Scripture <i>Divinity</i> - God the Father, Son, Spirit <i>Jesus</i> The Experience of Salvation
Awareness	Ignatian Awareness Examen Time in Nature Reflecting on Personal Experience Engaging Scripture* Sabbath-keeping* Honoring the Body*	The Holy Spirit <i>Humanity</i> - The Nature of Man - Image of God, yet fallen. <i>Rebellion</i> - The Experience of Salvation (sin/grace) Creation The Experience of Salvation Christ's Ministry in Heaven
Keeping Sabbath	Worship Time in Nature Reflection / Meditation Play Honoring the Body	Sabbath Experience of Salvation Creation <i>Joy</i>
Wholeness	Healthful Living Exercise Study/Learning Community Service/Missions Honoring the Body	Marriage and Family Christian Behavior
Anticipation	Dying Well Funeral/Memorial Services Lord's Supper Baptism	The Great Controversy Second Coming of Christ Death and Resurrection Millennium and End of Sin The New Earth <i>Future</i>
Worship	Baptism Lord's Supper Scripture Study Corporate Gathering Individual Devotions Acts of Compassion Forgiveness	Baptism The Lord's Supper Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus <i>Response</i>
Discernment	Scripture Study Prayer Spiritual Direction Household Economics Saying yes and no	Ten Commandment Biblical Principles Spirit of Prophecy <i>Love</i>
Hospitality /Service / Mission	Mission Service Acts of Compassion Financial Giving Outreach Projects Testimony	Mission of the Church Stewardship
Community	Spiritual Friendships Mentoring Foot-washing Small Groups	Gifts of the Spirit Spirit of Prophecy Unity in the Body of Christ <i>Purpose</i>

Figure 5.4 Proposed Seventh-day Adventist Practices with Embedded Doctrinal Themes

disciplines, and some are of my own making. Words in the far right column that appear in italics correspond to the chapter with that title in A Reason to Believe. Others correspond to listings in Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines.

Because a practice-based approach also seeks to enhance rather than mute individual voices, it needs to remain open to the likelihood that specific doctrinal content may, depending on the individuals involved and the uniqueness of their own experiences or life contexts, surface more readily in some content areas than others. Rather than forcing material to be dealt with in a predetermined way, it would seem desirable for the person(s) facilitating the preparation process to be flexible enough to make accommodations. With that in mind, a table like the one just considered might best serve less as a detailed lesson plan or road map, and more like a checklist that keeps track of what has been engaged and what has not, so that unengaged items could be returned to later to be examined if they had not managed to surface in other ways.

Summary of Suggested Practices

As emphasized before, this is just one of many possible configurations of Adventist practices that illustrates how the practices, as containers that hold the teachings of the church, could form the basis of an approach for preparing people for full participation in the life of the church. Because it is not only our agreement with and ability to explain what we believe, but the actual patterns of living that both grow out of what we believe and provide the relational context in which the content of what we

believe arises, it is my contention that a practice-based approach provides the best opportunity for preparing people for full participation in the life of the church.

Furthermore, practices help make the bridge to the realization that participation in the life of the church is also participation in the life of the world as the church. Because as we noted early in the project, practices address fundamental human needs, they are a means by which the church lives out its unique identity as a part of the world even as it does so with its own unique voice. Even though there are practices that occur primarily in the context of the church gathered together (e.g. worship, liturgy, ritual, etc.), the others involve engagement with the larger world community. Yet, even those who do occur primarily in the context of the gathered church still carry powerful implications for how the church does engage the rest of the world.²²

Additionally, maintaining a practice-based approach continues to foster an ongoing process of reflection and growth which prevents our patterns of living from stagnating within our theological categories, and challenges us to keep on evaluating and refining not only how faithfully we are practicing the faith, but how we can best define and articulate the meaning of what we are doing in theological terms. And even for those times when we may not be able to fully agree on all the details of how we explain what we are doing, the practices provide us with a way to nevertheless remain fully engaged in the life of the community and the divine mystery it represents that can never be fully articulated, as we continue to reflect and grow together in a way of life that still binds us

²²Dorothy Bass discusses these dynamics more fully in Bass, "Practical Theology and the Church."

together and gives us meaning and purpose, even as we continue to work out the details of how we construct our descriptions of it.

Appendix

Preparing People For Membership

Thank you for your willingness to respond to the questions on this survey. All of these questions assume that at the heart of Seventh-day Adventist Christianity is, or should be, a relationship with Jesus Christ based on a loving response of faith to His grace. Your responses will be very helpful.

Demographic Information:

Age _____

Gender (circle one) M F

Ethnicity _____

Number of years in ministry _____

Ministry Position (circle one) Sole Pastor Associate Pastor Senior Pastor Other

Survey Questions (Please circle the number that best corresponds to your response to each question)

1. Not at All
2. To Some Extent
3. Partially

4. For the Most Part
5. Entirely

- 1 2 3 4 5 I believe our identity as Seventh-day Adventists is best defined by theological statements that describe the contents of our beliefs. (Doctrinal Statements).
- 1 2 3 4 5 I believe our identity as Seventh-day Adventists is best defined by the lifestyle patterns that characterize us. (Sabbath-keeping, honoring and caring for our bodies [healthful living] and the bodies of others [medical care, etc.], serving others, personal and corporate worship, etc.)
- 1 2 3 4 5 When preparing people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, my primary focus is upon teaching, or helping people clearly understand, the basic beliefs of the church.
- 1 2 3 4 5 When preparing people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, my primary focus is upon helping people engage and develop the lifestyle patterns that characterize us.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My assumption is that, generally speaking, correct theological understanding will result in an authentic Christian lifestyle.
- 1 2 3 4 5 My assumption is that, generally speaking, it is in the context of living the patterns of an authentic Christian lifestyle that sound theology is best understood and clarified.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I would be interested in using material that approaches preparing people for church membership that focuses primarily on teaching and/or nurturing Christian practices (lifestyle patterns) and reflecting on what we believe from that context, rather than primarily focusing on the content of our faith, as what defines us.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I would be interested in using material that focuses primarily on the content of our faith rather than on the lifestyle patterns that flow from it in preparing people for membership in the church.

Please turn this sheet over and continue on the other side.

As I reflect on my own experience in ministry, the way that I see our faith actually being passed on the most effectively is through: (circle one)

A. Accurately teaching the content of what we believe.

B. Involving people in the lifestyle patterns (practices) of the Christian life.

C. _____

Overall, I am happy with materials that are available to me to prepare people for membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (circle one)

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither agree or disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Current Seventh-day Adventist material that is particularly helpful is:

Additional material that would be most helpful to me would be:

Other comments:

Thank you once again for your participation in this survey. Please place it in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided and mail it as soon as you can. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me at kcurtis@calimesasda.com or (909) 795-0343.

November 18, 2004

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

Thank you for taking a moment to open yet another letter that has found its way into your mailbox during the holiday season! I know how daunting the mailbox can seem at this time of year, and yet I am hoping that you will take just a moment to fill out the attached survey sheet, put it in the postage paid envelope, and drop it right back in your mailbox. It should only take a few minutes to complete, and will be of immense help to me.

The survey is going to pastors in the Southeastern California Conference. Please be assured that the survey is confidential, although I don't believe there is anything that is sensitive in nature or would be of concern to anyone. The information gathered will help contribute to a section of my D.Min project which has to do with preparing people for membership in the church. I would be happy to talk with you about sometime if you are interested, but don't want to impose any more letter reading time on you right now than I already have.

Thank you once again for your willingness to fill this out and mail it back as promptly as you can.

Sincerely,

Ken Curtis
Associate Pastor, Calimesa SDA Church

enclosure

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